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“In the middle of becoming”: Diasporic Identities in Dionne Brand’s Novels

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Preface:

This study explores contemporary Afro-Caribbean Canadian writer Dionne Brand's profound meditation on the representation of Black people in the diaspora and her concern with the articulation of selfhood for black diasporic individuals in a white and male-dominated society, which confine blacks and women to a subordinate position.

Taking the reader through the aftermath of the Middle Passage and wavering between Canada, the Caribbean and the world at large, in her body of work Brand investigates the ever-present consequences of Black diaspora, underlying the ways in which they still affect the lives of black diasporic individuals and how they prevent them from articulating their identities fully.

This work aims to go through those effects by investigating the rupture in history (Chapter 2), the dilemma of cultural displacement (Chapter 3), the rupture in identity (Chapter 3) and the problem of language (Chapter 4) faced by diasporic individuals and how they are presented in Brand's novels *In Another Place, Not Here*, *At the Full and Change of the Moon* and *What We All Long For*. However, since the corpus of her works constitutes an ever-evolving and ongoing exploration of the above mentioned issues, all closely interrelated, references are made to her whole oeuvre.

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List of Abbreviations:

A MAP	<i>A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging</i>
ATF	<i>At the Full and Change of the Moon</i>
BOOS	<i>Bread Out of Stone: Recollections on Sex, Recognitions, Race, Dreaming and Politics</i>
BURD	<i>No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario, 1920's to 1950's</i>
CHRON	<i>Chronicles of the Hostile Sun</i>
IAPHN	<i>In Another Place, Not Here</i>
LAND	<i>Land to Light On</i>
NLIN	<i>No Language is Neutral</i>
SS	<i>Sans Souci and Other Stories</i>
THIR	<i>Thirsty</i>
WWALF	<i>What We All Long For</i>

Chapter 1: An overview on the author's life and work

I am not a refugee
I have my papers
I was born in the Caribbean,
practically in the sea,
fifteen degrees above the equator,
I have a Canadian passport,
I have lived all my adult life,
I am stateless anyway
(CHRON, 70)

An Afro-Caribbean Canadian poet, novelist and filmmaker, Dionne Brand is a woman writer who has managed to make a strength out of her experience of Diaspora and of multiple displacements. Her literary production shows an ongoing effort to make sense of the complexities of her heritage, for it meditates on the history and on the cultures that produced her, and on how they inflect and complicate the issues of rootedness and belonging – whether in the Caribbean homeland or in Canada. Brand's works generally focus on issues concerning identity, race, gender and belonging, particularly in relation to her status as an exile from both her native and adopted homelands.

Of African descent, Brand's cultural and linguistic history and background have been affected by the traumatic experience of Diaspora of her ancestors. Much of Africa was in fact lost when her progenitors passed through the Door of No Return and were forcibly brought into the hell of New World exploitation and slavery. Moreover, having grown up in Guayaguayare – a small village in the very South of Trinidad –, she has been influenced by the Caribbean multicultural environment and by the unavoidable devastating impact of Colonialism. For instance, she was raised by her grandparents because her mother had left for a job in England, she received a British education in Naparima Girl's High School and she experienced on her skin the harshness of working as an agricultural labourer.

Brand's African heritage and the years of her childhood and adolescence in Trinidad are fundamental for her poetic inspiration and creative process, but it's her ongoing experience of living as a Black lesbian feminist in the heterogeneous multicultural Toronto that is at the core of her artistic project. Dionne Brand voluntarily migrated to Canada at the age of seventeen and enrolled at the University of Toronto, earning a B.A. in English and Philosophy in 1975 and completing her studies a few years later with a M.A. in Philosophy of Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. She has made a living as an educator for much of her writing career, holding several prestigious academic positions both in Canada and abroad.

In addition to teaching and being a writer, Brand is a radical social activist whose contribution to black and feminist communities is very important. Since her arrival in Canada in fact, she has been immersed in the feminist and Black liberation movements of the 1970s and has been working as a cultural critic and community worker for various organizations – including the Black Women's Collective, the Immigrant's Women Centre and the Black Education Project. Besides her social engagement, Brand also leads a politically committed life: she has been a member of the Communist Party of Canada and remains bound to Marxist ideas, in particular to the principles of equal distribution of the world's wealth, of cancellation of differences between capitalist and proletariat classes and of ending the exploitation of labour. Moreover, Brand has worked as a journalist and researcher for a great number of activist publications – including *Spear*, *Fuse Magazine*, *Poetry Canada Review* and *Network*¹ – and was the founding member and editor of *Our Lives*, Canada's first black women's newspaper.

Brand's poetry, novels, essays and films arise directly out of her social and political involvement. Being aware that the role of writers and artists in general is to try and

¹ Pauline BUTLING, 'Dionne Brand on Struggle and Community, Possibility and Poetry'. In *Poets Talk*, ed. by P. BUTLING and S. RUDY, Alberta: The University of Alberta Press, 2004, p. 63.

change the world, for Brand politics and poetry are intertwined and hardly extricable. In an essay included in the collection *Bread Out of Stone* she writes that ‘there is only writing that is significant, honest, necessary – making bread out of stone [...], there is an unburdening, uncovering the most vulnerable part of ourselves, uncovering beauty, possibility’ (BOOS, 23). The emblematic title of the collection, which is a sentence Brand’s mother used to describe her inability to feed her children, in this context refers to the power of language and writing to make something positive and to change things for the better. Refusing a definition of art that considers the concepts of aesthetic and politics as being mutually exclusive, Brand argues that since ‘we are living in a politically charged moment, that’s suffused in race and racism and the ideas of land and border and belonging’² all art is politically charged and should be read through a political lens.

In her books and documentaries, she has explored the feelings of displacement, isolation and rejection of modern black diasporic subjects as a consequence of the legacies of slavery and colonialism, often focusing on the specific situation of black women. As a lesbian migrant of colour in a white- and male-dominated society, Brand experiences herself a triple colonization: she comes from a colonized country whose heritage is one of domination and slavery; she has migrated to another “colonial” country in which the colour of her skin relegates her to an inferior position; and she is a female in a society “colonized” and ruled by males. Her writing and criticism are provocatively overt – sometimes even radical – in their condemnation of the issues of racism and sexism, and the resulting social, political and economic discriminations non-White Canadians like her have to face daily in the Canadian society.

² Christian OLBEY, ‘Dionne Brand in Conversation’. In *A Review of International English Literature*, Vol. 33, N. 2, April 2002, p. 87-103p. 100.

Dionne Brand has emerged as an important voice in contemporary postcolonial black writing because her poetry deals with issues and concerns that are traditionally silenced by the dominant culture. As a Trinidadian Canadian black lesbian feminist, she seeks to discuss in her literary and cultural productions all those ‘perceptions of race, gender and sexuality which continually reject the Other to the margins in order to reproduce a white, heterosexual, phallic “centre”’.³ Her writing is part of the so-called “poetics of resistance” for it is centred on the release from oppression and it stands against discriminations based on race or gender. As professor and president of the Association for Canadian Studies Christl Verduyn points out ‘for Brand, writing serves in the struggle against racial stereotyping. The reality of racism within Canadian experience is a recurrent theme in her writing, as it is in that of Philip, Harris, and others’.⁴

Having realized that Black people – and in particular Black women – have long been marginalized and forgotten in Canadian history and in literary representations, this active artist is determined to give testimony to what would otherwise be silenced or excluded by the hegemonic discourses of the dominant culture. Her concern is not simply speaking in the name of those who have been silenced, but also giving them a voice to let them speak for themselves as well as attributing to them some dignity of agency. Throughout her personal experience of both the Trinidadian and the Canadian educational systems in fact, Brand was ‘forced to read and learn about white people’ (BURD, 29). As a consequence, she is determined to develop in her writing some alternative voices to provide for the inclusion of the “marginal subjects” in literary representations and to enable readers to consider history and culture from a different

³ Charlotte STURGESS, ‘Dionne Brand Writing the Margins’. In *Caribbean Woman Writers: Fiction in English*, ed. by CONDÉ Mary and LONSDALE Thorunn, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999, p.202.

⁴ Christl VERDUYN, ‘Reconstructing Canadian Literature: The Role of Race and Gender’. In *Painting the Maple: Essays on Race, Gender and the Construction of Canada*, ed. by STRONG-BAOG Veronica, Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998, p. 104.

angle of vision. As Lynette Hunter points out, Brand ‘answers the alienation that results from modernism’s inappropriate history [...] and offers a set of historically based alternatives that shift away from the heroism of alienation towards questions of authenticity that deal in engagement and social support, that generate questions about trust: trust in ideology, in history, in language’.⁵

For instance, in her books Brand both contests the national prevailing aesthetics that either ignores or expropriates difference, and resists all forms of perpetuating colonialism and hegemony in the present. Produced by a long history of domination, the modern world is one where the people from the colonized territories have been denied their subjectivity, agency and history. Therefore, in Brand’s opinion it must be fought against at all levels – social, political, economical and cultural – in order to counter the ongoing imperialist discourses, to grant Black individuals their subjectivity and to improve the condition of living of diasporic people.

Moreover, Brand’s body of work reveals an extraordinary ability to make history living and concrete by blending the simple ordinary things of life and personal happenings together with broader historical events. For Brand in fact, the socio-political and the historic are essential ingredients in aesthetic expression. As a result, her writings and documentaries show a long commitment to the history of diasporic people and as Bengali-Canadian writer Himani Bannerji points out ‘to read her poetry is to read not only about her, but also about her people, her identification with their struggles both in the metropole of Canada and in the hinterland of the Caribbean’.⁶ Throughout her literary production, Brand does not only try to capture the living conditions of Blacks in the Diaspora in the course of time, but also makes an attempt to help build a collective

⁵ Lynette HUNTER, ‘After Modernism: Alternative Voices in the Writings of Dionne Brand, Claire Harris and Marlene Philip’. In *University of Toronto Quarterly*, V. 62, N. 2, Winter 1992, p. 260.

⁶ Himani BANNERJI, ‘Dionne Brand (1953 -)’. In *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. by CUMBER DANCE Daryl, New York: Greenwood Press, 1986, p.47.

common memory to which Black people who live in various parts of the world outside Africa may refer.

While questioning the Western presentation of history and facts, Brand also challenges and alters Western language in an ongoing effort to resist its ability to dehumanize, subjugate and silence black subjects, especially women. Thematically and technically, she deconstructs conventional English language to find new hidden meanings in words and to show that its imposition as a standard is very limiting for there are not one, but many proper “Englishes”. Writing from an in-between space and using a new language that is ‘transformative, polyvocal and constantly shifting’⁷, Brand is able to express her perspective and positions, to articulate an authentic black experience, and to voice wholly her identity as a lesbian woman of colour.

Throughout her writing career she has demonstrated to be a very eclectic artist: her impressive body of work not only covers a wide range of topics and issues on identity, sexuality and cultural diversity, but also explores a great variety of genres and formal-stylistic strategies. Although she has experimented with many literary forms – including poetry, fiction, biography, novel, short-story, essay and even documentary, Brand has mainly concentrated her efforts on poetry. She once told the *Ottawa Citizen* in fact, that if poetry was more financially rewarding, she would devote herself to it exclusively: ‘I would prefer to simply write [poetry]. It would make me ecstatic. That would be all I need’.⁸

Brand’s poetry is innovative and crafted: it’s characterized by formal, thematic and linguistic experimentation aimed at meeting her wish and need to articulate with passion and honesty her experience as an adolescent in a multicultural environment and as an

⁷ Teresa ZACKODNIK, “‘I Am Blackening in My Way’: Identity and Place in Dionne Brand’s No Language is Neutral” in *Writing Ethnicity*, ed. by Winfred SIEMERLING, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, n.57, Toronto, 1995, p.205.

⁸ *Ottawa Citizen*, 19th November 1997, p.C1. Quoted in James MANHEIN, ‘Brand, Dionne 1953–’. In *Contemporary Black Biography*, 2002. *Encyclopedia.com* <<http://www.encyclopedia.com>>.

immigrant woman of colour in Canada. Expressly referring to Brand's considerable corpus of poetry, Italian academic and theorist Franca Bernabei claims that 'Brand's poetic production reveals a remarkable variety of formal-stylistic strategies and semantic richness as well as the ongoing pursuit of a voice and a language that embody her political, affective, and aesthetic engagement with the human condition of the black woman – and, more exactly, all those oppressed by the hegemonic program of modernity'.⁹

Dionne Brand made her literary debut in 1978 with *Fore Day Morning*, a volume that includes both a recollection of memories from her childhood in Trinidad and her painful separation from her beloved grandmother, and a testimony of the racism and cultural imperialism in the Caribbeans that prompted her migration to Canada. The majority of the poems included in this collection deals almost exclusively with the processes or effects of colonialism, an issue that is ever-present in her literary production. In particular, the opening poem works as an invitation to readers to join the author in the battlefield to fight against all forms of imperialism and economic and social oppression.

Disappointed by the scarcity of children's literature about the black experience she discovered while working for the Black Education Project, the following year she published *Earth Magic*, a book of poetry for kids in which she makes a tribute to the lives of the Caribbean people and celebrates the power of nature. Although this short collection principally focuses on the colours, sounds and smells of life in the tropical island, Brand finds room in it to inform the young audience of the horrors of the Middle Passage and to underline the importance for the diasporic subjects to be aware of their past.

⁹ Franca BERNABEI, 'Testimonianze/Appreciations'. In *Luce ostinata/Tenacious Light*, ed. by B. GORJUP, F. VALENTE, Ravenna: Angelo Longo Editore, 2007, p.6.

Echoing the militant sentiments of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, her third collection *Primitive Offensive* (1982) tracks the origin of the African Diaspora, exalts its contribution to Western civilization and celebrates the role of ancestral wisdom and practices. Throughout this ambitious long historical poem divided into fourteen parts, Dionne Brand underlines the ongoing injustice and suffering of Black people through the ages by depicting stories of racial discrimination and violence that range from the past to the future. Being confused by the dynamicity of this constant movements through time and having to create a web of connections among people, locations and times, the reader is therefore in the same position as the writer herself for s/he is required to explore his own subjectivity and to be in many places all at once.

The following collection of poems *Winter Epigrams*, which is combined in a volume with *Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defence of Claudia* (1983), is more experimental, for Brand abandons the medium-length poems, where images and ideas were extensively developed, in favour of suggestive short quick sketches. In the first part of the collection, Dionne Brand describes the hard life of black immigrants in Canada, suggesting that the act of surviving Toronto's extremely cold winter climate corresponds to the act of resisting all forms of racial discrimination and oppression suffered by black members in the alienating Canadian society. Suffused with irony and wit, this first section also offers a reflection on the role of black intellectuals as well as an explanation on why her poetry is focused on the black experience. The second section is a feminist questioning and rewriting of the traditional betrayal story by the Nicaraguan poet and priest Ernesto Cardenal. Choosing the revolutionary poet as her interlocutor, Brand discusses patriarchy as a mode of social organization and describes the condition of women – all the Claudias of this world –, in particular the situation of African-descended women who remain alienated in and marginalized by the societies in which they live.

Winter Epigrams & Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defence of Claudia and *Primitive Offensive* represent Brand's first two works that explicitly deal with political issues as they especially oppose colonial oppression and imperialism. As for Brand's corpus of poetry, writing and politics are inexorably linked together and are in fact seen by the author herself as 'a single whole in her effort to struggle against any form of belittlement and stereotyping of the Black experience in the society she lives in'.¹⁰

Her following published book, *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* is even increasingly political in its scope. Printed in 1984, this collection deals more extensively with contemporary Caribbean history since it is inspired by Brand's personal experience as an activist in the disastrous revolution of Grenada and by her outrage at the subsequent American invasion in October 1983. The poems included in this volume show her awareness of the need for the Caribbean and the states of Central America – and for the other Third World countries in general – to change and her frustration and anger at the United States of America for having destroyed the work and the hopes of Grenadian people.

While in Brand's first five collections she adopts a traditional poetic style and structure marked by sparse images, easy language and short lines, the publication of *No Language is Neutral* in 1990 marks a significant shift in her poetry. Formally, Brand experiments with prose poems, longer lines, Caribbean demotic speech and hybrid language; thematically, she not only continues to investigate issues such as racism, sexism and the importance of history and memory, but also begins to articulate her newly discovered lesbian sexuality. Using a new hybrid "postcolonial" language that mingles together what Brand calls the "Received Standard" English and the

¹⁰ Simona BERTACCO, 'Imagining Bodies in the Work of Dionne Brand'. In *Altre Modernità*, Milano: Università degli Studi di Milano, March 2009, p.10.

“Trinidadian” language,¹¹ she testifies the power of poetry to reshape one’s identity by reworking language constructs. Moreover, the language practice of repetition and parody represents the space of resistance and renewal that allows her to both rewrite the space of Black Diaspora and to attempt writing a way home. This poetry collection, which gives voice to unspoken histories of slavery, colonial domination and migration, was nominated for the prestigious Governor General’s Award and officially marked Brand’s international literary recognition.

Brand’s next book of poetry, *Land to Light On* (1997), was generally acclaimed and won both the Governor General’s award and the Trillium book award. This collection, which consists mainly of prose poems loosely organized into seven numbered sections, reveals Brand’s disillusion and anger at the worldwide defeat of socialism, at the widespread violence of contemporary times and at the inequality and injustice of Canadian society. Mostly written during Brand’s stay in the rural area of Burnt River, it describes her own and other outsiders’ experiences in a hostile and unfamiliar landscape where immigrants are isolated and discriminated against.

While *No Language is Neutral* is mainly about the memories of her native homeland and *Land to Light On* deals with her experiences in the inhospitable rural Canadian landscape, in Brand’s more recent books of poetry she investigates the nature of locality and community in Toronto and in the globalized modern world at large. Shortlisted for the City of Toronto Book Award, the Griffin Poetry Prize and the Trillium book award, *Thirsty* (2002) focuses on the life conditions in the cosmopolitan Toronto, especially with respect to the diasporic subjects that are marginalized and live in the periphery of the global city. The volume contains a socio-political narrative poem that revolve around a family drama – the unmotivated ignominious assassination of a

¹¹ Makeda SILVERA, ‘In the Company of my Work: An Interview with Dionne Brand’. In *The Other Woman: Women of Colour in Contemporary Canadian Literature*, ed. Makeda Silvera, Toronto: Sister Vision, 1995, p.356-380.

black man by a violent white police officer – and the indifference of the city and its inhabitants at this terrible crime. Besides focusing on Toronto’s desolation, inhumanity, injustice and beauty as well, Brand takes up the issue of citizenship, questions the possibility of belonging, provides a powerful critique of diasporic subjects’ appalling living conditions and explores the generational divide between the first generation of migrants and the rootless second generation.

Published in 2006, *Inventory* represents a continuation of the previous poetic project because it also plays the role of witness of the multicultural contemporary society and it considers the metropolitan city as a global space of meeting and clash. As in *Thirsty*, Brand underlines how the global city brings pain and anguish and causes the failure of human relationships, but instead of focusing only on the cosmopolitan Toronto, this collection opens up to the entire world. This long political poem – which was shortlisted both for the Governor General’s award and for the Trillium book award – offers a report on human life in global cities: it portrays human suffering and alienation, racial discriminations and prejudices, collective fears and intolerance against immigrants.

Brand’s latest poetic achievement, the Griffin Poetry Prize-winner *Ossuaries* (2010), is a long poem divided into fifteen parts consisting of a series of powerful evocative images and long profound meditations on the historical and cultural changes of the last decades. At the centre of this collection is the troubled life of Jasmine, an American woman who joined the radical leftist party during the 1970s, was involved in a bank robbery and has lived an underground clandestine life in a perpetual state of movement ever since. As the borderless and timeless memories of this unrooted woman unfolds, the reader gets involved in her contemplation of the crisis of the contemporary world and her questioning of which elements of her life and of modernity in general will remain in the future. Similar to Brand’s previous book of poetry for style and tone,

Ossuaries investigates the traces that people leave – intentionally or accidentally, destructively or gently – in the world, on each other and their impact on the history, culture and environment.

Over the last thirty years, Dionne Brand has been writing increasingly subtle, cryptic and expansive long poems testing the capacity of language to address global ethical questions. As a poet, she moved beyond the mere issues of Diaspora, migration and belonging, to a broader questioning of one's relation to place and society, to an investigation of the complex genealogy of Black people from the Middle Passage to the present, and to an analysis of the problems of identity-making for people who have fractured and disoriented connections to multiple places. Moreover, in her ten-volume corpus of poetry she has challenged and rejected standard English to experiment with a "language not yet made" (IAPNH, 35) – a hybrid, polyvocal, transformative and constantly shifting language mixing both standard English and Caribbean Creole – able to voice her complex polyvalent subjectivity as well as the great variety of alternative voices of black subjects which are silenced by the dominant discourses.

Like her poetry, Brand's prose is lyrical, experimental and rhetorically innovative; it focuses on the displaced rootless individual, on the cultural silencing, on the trauma of exile; it is concerned with the problem of finding a voice for the racially and sexually inscribed Other; and it contains a strong political message that echoes concerns about race, gender and class. Moreover, also Brand's prose shows an evident synergy between her writing and her political activities and it responds politically and poetically to forms of discrimination and oppression that include racism, sexism and homophobia.

Brand's experimentation with fiction began in 1988 with the publication of *Sans Souci and Other Stories*, a collection of evocative short tales that draw upon the memories of her childhood in Trinidad, her migration and settlement as a young adult in Toronto, and her return to the Caribbean during the Revolution of Grenada. Shifting

between the West Indies and North America, these short stories celebrates the strength, the worth and the bravery of black diasporic subjects – especially of black women – that were driven by poverty to leave their homes for a hostile new country and now have to fight daily against their discrimination and to strive for justice, freedom, respect and human dignity. Struggling with the consequences of a colonized past in the Caribbeans as well as with the contemporary realities of globalization and imperialism, these women ‘express a repeated need to leave the place they occupy and to find a space of empowerment’.¹² Besides focusing on these issues, Brand explores the ever-present trauma of the Middle Passage and of the Diaspora, and investigates the role of the Atlantic as a site of identification, of resistance and imagined community for blacks. Written in the same period of the poetry book *No Language is Neutral*, this collection of short stories is also very experimental as for the possibilities of language, for it continually shifts from Standard English to Caribbean vernacular, from written language to oral, from narration to poetry.

Published in 1997 and designated a New York Times Notable book, Brand’s successful debut novel *In Another Place, Not Here* extends the commitments of her poetry to develop a fully lesbian love story in which the issues of Diaspora, exile and belonging are central. As the majority of her works, this novel also draws upon Brand’s Trinidadian background and her personal experience as a migrant in Canada for both the depiction of the main characters and for the events narrated. Set in Toronto and in an unnamed Caribbean island strongly resembling Grenada, the novel is divided into two parts, each presented by the two main characters: Elizete, a rural Grenadian sugar-cane cutter, and Verlia, an idealistic Trinidadian-Canadian Marxist revolutionary. Structured around the movements of its protagonists between nations and places, *In Another Place*,

¹² Johanna GARVEY, “‘The place she miss’: Exile, Memory and Resistance in Dionne Brand’s fiction”. In *Callaloo, A Journal of Diaspora Arts and Letters*, Vol. 26, N.2, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, Spring 2003, p.487.

Not Here is a complicated lesbian story that focuses on the immigrants' struggles over space, language, identity and belonging, and claims a space for gay and lesbian representations in the Caribbean culture.

Named a Los Angeles Times Notable book, *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999) continues Brand's earlier engagement with issues central to much postcolonial writing, namely issues of history, place and identity. Tracing the lives of the Trinidadian slave Marie Ursule and her descendants, Brand's second novel spans the time and the geography of the African Diaspora itself, from the nineteenth century to the present day; from the Caribbean sugar-cane plantations to the lively urban streets of New York and to the faraway Dam square in Amsterdam. Struggling against the consequences of colonialism and the injustices of the social and economic systems, the main characters of this novel are all members of the Black Diaspora haunted by the trauma of slavery and of exile that are inexorably experiencing feelings of loss and longing, and are trapped in a present full of suffering between an unforgettable traumatic past and an unfathomable future. In this book indeed, Brand widens her field of analysis to include a profound treatment of the issues of history, memory, inheritance and trauma.

Her most recent novel *What We All Long For*, which was published with a great acclaim in 2005, features an overlapping narrative structure created from the intertwined voices of a group of twenty-something second-generation Canadians living in downtown Toronto. Like the poetry collection *Thirsty*, this novel portrays the metropolitan urban life of Toronto, a multiracial global space where its protagonists experience rejection, longing and loss. *What We All Long For* is not only about this particular city; it's about the universal condition of being human and about the strives of diasporic subjects to express their identities and to find their own space in the city. As part of the ongoing debate over Canadian identity, this book explores the process of

self-definition and the negotiation of diasporic people's subjectivity both for the first and for the second generation migrants.

In addition to fiction, Brand's prose oeuvre also includes several non-fiction works – most of which are collaborations – reflecting concerns about racism and cultural imperialism. Her first publication of this type is the volume of essays she co-edited with Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta *Rivers Have Sources, Trees Have Roots: Speaking of Racism* (1986), which is an extended collection of articles and interviews – ranging from personal anecdotes, to childhood memories and to workplace experiences – that harshly criticizes racial and sexist discrimination against people of colour in Toronto.

Compiled by using the preliminary research material she had accumulated for a doctorate degree she later abandoned, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario, 1920s-1950s* consists of a collection of several oral accounts by black working-class women Brand collected and co-wrote with Lois De Shield in 1991. As in the previous essay collection, she uses interviews to black Canadians as a powerful tool to explore and represent the experience of African migrants. Furthermore, being aware that “the culture of racism” is used as a powerful tool to censor oppositional voices, in both these collections of essays Brand attempts to struggle against racism by giving each person an individual voice to speak of their personal stories of discrimination, to express their pain and anger, and to herald a truthful representation of the real condition of living of black diasporic subjects.

Similarly, in her essay published in the anthology *We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up: Essays in African Canadian Women's History* (1994) – a book exploring the role of Black women in Canada's history over three hundred years –, Dionne Brand attempts to review the experiences of black female labourers in Ontario between the two World Wars because she is aware that Canadian history has recorded very little information on that subject. She states in fact that ‘as a feminist recorder

facing the problem of white and biased documentation, I found that oral history opened up that vast and yet untapped well of events, knowledge, and experience that Black women live and have lived in this country'.¹³

Brand's next non-fiction book, *Bread Out of Stone: Recollections on Sex, Recognitions, Race, Dreaming and Politics* (1994), is an original and critical study of race, gender, class and politics in contemporary culture. Like the previous volumes of essays, this book focuses on the silencing of marginalized subjects by the hegemonic system, on the role of black women in the Canadian society, on the consequences of Diaspora and on the negative effects of racial and sexual discrimination. Moreover, this collection of thirteen essays also deals with other different topics such as the idea of "Canadianness", the effects of cultural appropriation and the politics of writing.

Written in the form of a note narrative, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001) is an insightful book of discovery that draws on cartography, African ancestry, history, childhood memories, philosophy, literature and travel narrative. In this self-reflexive meditation on identity, memory and the history of African Diaspora, Brand sketches the constantly shifting borders of nation and home, and examines the nature and relevance of self-definition and belonging in a culturally diverse and changing world. Focusing on the living condition of the disarticulated diasporic black subjects, the book also portrays individual experiences of the black Diaspora and expresses a great variety of feelings, including anxiety, loss and longing.

Brand's prolific production also includes further collaborations to the realization of volume of essays, namely *Imagination, Representation, and Culture* (1994) and the recent *A Kind of Perfect Speech* (2008), the co-editing of the anthology *The Journey Prize Stories: The Best of Canada's New Stories* (2007) and the co-direction of many

¹³ Dionne BRAND, "'We weren't allowed to go into factory work until Hitler started the war': The 1920s to the 1940s'. In *We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up: Essays in African Canadian Women's History* ed. Peggy BRISTOW, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994, p.171.

films for the National Film Board of Canada. Since 1989 in fact, Brand has distinguished herself by directing three documentary films that constitute the “Women at the Well trilogy” project: *Older, Stronger, Wiser* (1989), which includes five detailed portraits of older Black Canadian women; *Sisters in the Struggle*, which is about some Black active women taking part in community organizing, electoral politics and black and feminist associations; *Long Time Comin’*, which depicts the lives, politics and lesbian sexuality of two female African-Canadian artists.

Moreover, over the past twenty years Brand has also contributed to the realization of several other documentaries concerning general topics such as black identity, racism and cultural constructions, as well as more specific issues such as the condition of living of undocumented workers or the use of the veil by Arab women in North America, namely *Listening for Something: Adrienne Rich and Dionne Brand in Conversation* (1996), *Beyond Borders: Arab Feminists Talk About Their Lives...East and West* (1999), *Under One Sky: Arab Women in North America Talk About the Hijab* (1999) and *Borderless: A Docu-Drama About the Lives of Undocumented Workers* (2006).

Over the last thirty years, her prose, essays and poems have been widely published in magazines and also appeared in numerous anthologies. Nevertheless, in an old interview with the editor and writer Beverly Daurio, Brand responds to the representation of her work in reviews as follows: ‘Reviews are equally racist. Work by peoples of colour has to prove universality; a white writer is never asked to prove that. The other things you look for in a review are words like ‘anger’. Reviewers always talk about the anger of Black writers’.¹⁴ Brand’s harsh consideration on the issue is a consequence of the widespread tendency of Canadian ‘national’ publishing and

¹⁴ Beverly DAURIO, “The Language of Resistance: In her Poetry, Dionne Brand is Rewriting History in a Way that Saves our Humanity”, in *Books of Canada* Vol. 19, N. 7, 1990, p.13-16 or available online at <www.booksincanada.com/article_view.asp?id=2003>.

reviewing industry to marginalize and reject writings by Black subjects and other minorities for not being “Canadian enough”.

At any rate, nowadays Brand’s contribution to literature is generally praised both for its political content and for its rhetorical strategies, and is recognized by both Canadian and international audiences. During her writing career Brand has received many prestigious awards and honours, including the appointment as Poet Laureate of Toronto in 2009, and has left an indelible print on the cultural mosaic of Canada. Her eclectic writing – in the form of prose and poetry, fiction and non-fiction – has multiplied the ways in which she is present on the Canadian literary scene and, as Cecil Foster of the *Ottawa Citizen* pointed out, Brand is nowadays ‘undoubtedly at the forefront of the resurgence of black writing in Canada’.¹⁵

¹⁵ *Ottawa Citizen*, 4th May 1997, p. M13. Quoted in James MANHEIN, ‘Brand, Dionne 1953– ’. In *Contemporary Black Biography*, 2002. *Encyclopedia.com* <<http://www.encyclopedia.com>>.

Chapter 2: Time

What is diaspora? For the Greeks, from whose language the word originated, diaspora meant the dispersal of population through colonization. For the Jews, Africans and Armenians and other peoples the word acquired a more sinister and brutal meaning. Diaspora meant a collective trauma, a banishment into exile and a heart-aching longing to return home.¹⁶

The concept of Diaspora challenges the ‘cultural and historical mechanics of belonging’¹⁷ because it describes the dispersal of individuals from their homeland - across geographical and cultural borders -, it conjures up images of migration, loss and uprooting, and it refers to the breaking of any connection to one’s own origin and past.

Diasporic people live a paradoxical condition as they are cut off from their past and haunted by their past at the very same time. As a consequence of Diaspora’s dispersal across multiple lands, lost unrecorded histories and familiar separations, diasporic subjects are totally disconnected from their ancestral roots and therefore it is impossible for them to feel any connection to their past, heritage and ancestral tradition, and to outline and trace their origins. Moreover, the horrifying experience of the Middle Passage and slavery had such a devastating impact on the lives of African diasporas that its aftermath has haunted and shaped – and keeps on shaping – the lives of the next generations.

In her body of work, Brand shows an ongoing effort to make sense of the complexities of her heritage and offers a profound treatment of the issues of history, memory, nostalgia, inheritance and trauma. She investigates the rupture in history and in identity faced by diasporic subjects, who experience feelings of loss, nostalgia and longing; who are haunted by their ancestors’ colonial past and the horrors of slavery; who are trapped in a reality of suffering divided between an unforgettable traumatic past and an unfathomable future.

¹⁶ Robin COHEN, *Global Diasporas*, UCL Press, London, 1997.

¹⁷ Paul GILROY, *Against race: Imagining political culture beyond the color line or Between camps: Nations, cultures and the allures of race*, Penguin Books, London, 2000, p.123.

Taking the reader through the consequences of Diaspora, Brand's writings show that although it is not possible to fully transcend the hauntings of history, the present can be worked upon to make things better for the future. As Joanne Soul argues, "the way Brand negotiates disparate geographies and histories speaks volumes about her sense of human agency, potential, and creativity, against a backdrop of history that is haunting and deeply scarring".¹⁸

2.1 Origins, Roots and the Black Atlantic

Lasting from the middle of the 16th century until the 1860s, the transatlantic forced migration of African people to the New World in conditions of slavery is referred to as the African Diaspora. This forcible migration involved millions of Africans and was a major factor in the demographic and economic development in the colonies in the Americas, including not only the United States, but also the Caribbean region and Latin America.

The Door of No Return is literally the narrow passage through which African people in chains were pushed in order to be led to the big slaving ship heading to the New World. As Brand explains, "the door is a place, real, imaginary and imagined. [...] It is a place which exists or existed. The door out [of] which Africans were captured, loaded onto ships heading for the New World" (A MAP, 19). A passage into a haunted future, the Door of No Return is not actually a physical area, but rather a place of memories in the mind of Black diasporic individuals that hosts the roots and routes from the Middle Passage to the New World. As Brand points out, 'the door looms both as horror and a romance, though. The horror is of course three or four hundred years of

¹⁸ Joanne SAUL, 'In the Middle of Becoming: Dionne Brand's Historical Vision'. In *Canadian Woman Studies*, Vol. 23, N.2, 2004, p. 60.

slavery, its shadow was and is colonialism and racism. The romance is of the place beyond the door, the Africa of our origins' (A MAP, 22).

The Door of No Return is a 'geohistorical site of forced departures which provoked psychic tearing, the immeasurable attrition of enslaved labour, the humiliations of colonialism and racism, and [...] still causes inconsolable grief to the descendants of the slaves'.¹⁹ It stands as a symbol for the dramatic historical moment that haunts the consciousness of Blacks in the Diaspora as it marks the end of belonging, ancestry and roots. As Brand points out: 'Having no name to call on was having no past; having no past pointed to the fissure between the past and the present. That fissure is represented in the Door of No Return: that place where our ancestors departed one world for another; the Old World for the New. The place where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast. [...] A site of belonging or unbelonging' (A MAP, 5).

An experience of uprooting, exile and loss, Middle Passage has not only marked the lives of those who were forcibly taken from Africa and brought to the New World to be exploited, but also shaped and shapes the lives of their descendants. Focusing on her experience as a black diasporic woman, Brand highlights the existence of a rupture that affects the quality of being. She affirms: 'we were not from the place where we lived and we could not remember where we were from or who we were' (A MAP, 5). She even recalls an episode in which she is unable to answer a simple question concerning her origin made her by a child: 'Miss, you from Town? From "Town". I am dumbfounded. I suddenly realize that I cannot answer this simplest of questions. I don't know where I'm from. I am from nowhere that I can explain to them' (A MAP, 177). Once again, in an unpublished interview quoted in Claire Harris' essay "Poets in

¹⁹ Franca BERNABEI, "'What We All Long For": Dionne Brand's Transatlantic Metamorphoses'. In *Recharting the Black Atlantic: modern cultures, local communities, global connections*, ed. by A. OBOE, A. SCACCHI, London: Routledge, 2008, p.112.

Limbo” Brand states: “When you grow up black anywhere in the western world, there is an uneasiness...an anxiety of place. It is as if there is nothing behind you”.²⁰

Completely cut off from their past, members of diasporic communities face the pain of being rootless and of having no lineage, no ancestors, no family to count on. Searching for any memory and representation of her Black female ancestors, in the poem *No Language is Neutral*, Brand amalgamates the experiences of her mother, aunts, cousins, grandmothers and so on, in the figure of a black woman whose emblematic name Liney recalls the word “lineage”, namely the lines of family leading back to a common ancestor. Through the figure of this woman Brand does not only represent her own familiar experience, but also articulates the experiences of any diasporic woman, of all the other Lineys in the world.

Like Brand herself, her characters are directed by rootlessness and do not have any ancestry to relate to. In *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, Marie Ursule’s descendants are not aware of the familiar relationships among them and do not recognize each other when they happen to meet by chance. For example, Bola’s descendant Cordelia Rojas tries to ask for directions to a man in a black suit under a tamarind tree who turns out to be Bola’s grandchild Private Sones; or Bola’s great grandson Priest introduces to his sister Eula their young cousin Adrian without being aware of the family relationship linking the three of them.

For diasporic individuals there are no clear boundaries and genealogical lines and in *At the Full and Change of the Moon* Brand seems to overcome the patriarchal fixed family tree structure by offering a range of intertwined connections cantered in the ocean. A metaphor for the various African diasporic communities scattered around the world, Brand’s genealogical map represents an alternative counter-memory to the

²⁰ Claire HARRIS, “Poets in Limbo” in *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*, ed. by NEUMAN Sherley and KAMBOURELI Smaro, Edmonton: Longspoon-NeWest, 1986, p. 117.

collective memory proposed by the imperial dominant discourse. The novel indeed spans the time and the geography of the African Diaspora from the beginning of the 19th century till the late 20th century, from the sugar cane plantations in the Caribbeans to South America, the United States and Europe offering an alternative view and perspective on the trauma of colonialism and slavery.

In *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, in a long letter addressed to her dead mother, Bola's granddaughter Eula makes reference to the irrevocable damage caused by the Middle Passage and feels as if black diasporas 'had been scattered out with a violent randomness' (ATF, 258). As well as other diasporic subjects, Eula feels as she has nothing to hold on, no community to be part of and no ancestry to feel close to. She expresses her desire to have a traceable ancestry and a counter-memory, a counter-vision of the history of the Black Diaspora. She writes:

I would like to have one single line of ancestry, Mama. One line from you to me and farther back, but a line that I can trace. [...] One line like the one in your palm with all the places where something happened and is remembered. I would like one line full of people who have no reason to forget anything, or forgetting would not help them or matter because the line would be constant, unchangeable. A line that I can reach for in my brain when I feel off kilter. Something to pull me back. I want a village and a seashore and a rock out in the ocean and the certainty that when the moon is in full the sea will rise and for that whole time I will be watching what all of my ancestry have watched for, for all ages (ATF, 246-247)

At any rate, as a consequence of Diaspora's dispersal across multiple lands, lost unrecorded histories and familiar separations, often the traceable line of ancestry Eula is looking for is impossible to recover back to a point of origin. This is not a mere consequence of the initial dispersal, but also of all interactions and displacements that have taken place ever since.

Underlining that for Black diasporas it is impossible to define precise origin and lineage, in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand asserts that diasporic subjects 'have

no ancestry except the black water and the Door of No Return' (A MAP, 61). And she later adds:

Too much has been made of origins. Origins are arbitrary. [...] Here at home, in Canada, we are all implicated in the sense of origins. It is a manufactured origin nevertheless, playing to our need for home, however tyrannical. This country, in the main a country of immigrants, is always redefining origins, jockeying and smarming for degrees of belonging (A MAP, 64)

The issue of origins for diasporic subjects is indeed definitely complex. As black diasporas have been disconnected from their ancestral roots and 'detached – disembedded – from specific times, places, histories and traditions'²¹, it is impossible to track and define their origin in a traditional sense. Cultural theorist Paul Gilroy maps a "critical space/time cartography"²² that questions the idea of belonging and traces new forms of national and ethnic belonging that are trans-border, nomadic, interstitial and multifaceted. He does away with traditional concepts such as roots and race and presents new forms of belonging that turn out to be more suitable for those who have been disrupted by the diaspora.

As the history of black diaspora is a history of migration, for Paul Gilroy black origin should be defined in terms of transnational roots. In his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*,²³ he presents an alternative view of nationality and origin by offering the emblematic transcendent image of the sailing ship moving around the Black Atlantic. A chronotope for the Black culture and its history, this evocative metaphorical image captures the essence of the Middle Passage which is

²¹ Stuart HALL, 'The Question of Cultural Identity'. In *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, ed. by S. HALL, D. HELD, D. HUBERT, K. THOMPSON, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996, p. 622.

²² Paul GILROY, 2000, p.117.

²³ Paul GILROY, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso, 1993.

fundamental to the history of African Diaspora and to the understanding of the experience of transnational black modernity.

As after the Middle Passage ancestral roots were broken and destroyed, the current condition of diasporic subjects is no more defined by rootedness, but rather by rootlessness. As Brand points out, ‘Rootlessness is not a problem for me, and it doesn’t have to do with Canada in particular. I think it has to do with that door. I think that after that door, rootedness is impossible. I think that rootedness is origin for some. How can you face that history and feel any rootedness?’.²⁴ For Brand, the new starting point for relocating and defining diasporic subjects is rootlessness.

At any rate, if we have to determine the origin of black diasporas this could be located in the Atlantic Ocean as it can be considered a site of identification, resistance and imagined community for blacks. To choose the ocean – hence water – it is to choose flux and movement over stasis and therefore to offer a view on origins which is much more suitable for representing the history of exile and migrations of black diasporic subjects. The sea is where the history of diasporic people is located as it is the place that locks up the battles, martyrs and tribal memory of the millions of Africans who forcibly travelled the routes of the Middle Passage. Indeed, the African slaves were brought to the New World by crossing the ocean and many of them died during the trip and were buried in the sea.

Pointing at the absence of history in the Caribbeans, in the emblematic poem “The Sea is History”,²⁵ Derek Walcott reminds the reader that the sea contains the most powerful monuments, namely mosaics of bones ‘soldered by coral to bone’²⁶ which

²⁴ Paulo DA COSTA, “Interview with Dionne Brand”, 2001, available online at <<http://www.paulodacosta.com/dionne.htm>>

²⁵ Derek WALCOTT, *Collected Poems: 1948-1984*, London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992, p. 364-367.

²⁶ Derek WALCOTT, 1992, p. 364.

refers to the great number of victims of the Middle Passage who were swallowed by the ocean. The opening stanza of Walcott's poem states:

Where are your monuments, your battles, your martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
Is that grey vault. The sea. The sea
Has locked them up. The sea is history.²⁷

As the Atlantic Ocean is a sort of arena in which much transnational history was lived, it represents a huge archive for civilization and ancestral history and it works as a repository for the memories of the Middle Passage. Therefore sea 'is inscribed on all generations' (BOOS, 10) of black diasporas.

With reference to her familiar experience Brand affirms that 'our origins seemed to be in the sea' (A MAP, 12). Indeed, in order to locate blacks in the Diaspora, in *A Map to the Door of No Return* Brand develops a cartographic project by which she traces roots and routes of homecoming and redraws origins and identities through the ocean, an element that both recalls the trauma of the Middle Passage and connects the way to home and hope. She also describes her own relationship with the ocean: how the sea was both feared and loved, how it gave her a sense of leaving and arrivals, how she perceived it as her own country.

With reference to the sea and the ocean, in the essays collection *Bread out of Stone* Brand asserts that 'it is a comfort to look at either one. If something hard is on your mind and you are deep in it, if you lift your head you will see the sea and your trouble will become irrelevant because the sea is so much bigger than you, so much more striking and magnificent, that you will feel presumptuous' (BOOS, 4). No matter if the Atlantic Ocean is inevitably linked to the terrible memory of the Middle Passage, diasporic subjects still envision it as a reassuring comforting element. In her body of

²⁷ Derek WALCOTT, 1992, p. 364.

work Brand makes a great use of watery images both to express and underline the effects of Diaspora and to show how the sea works as a space of possibility and security for diasporic individuals.

In *Sans Souci and Other Stories*, the young protagonist of the short story titled “Sans Souci” – a woman victim of a rape who is abused and mistreated by her husband – envisions the ocean as an escape from her pain and her estrangement: ‘Then, she would look down into the sea and rehearse her falling – a free fall, a dive into the sea. How fast the sea would come toward her’ (SS, 2). She further imagines the ocean as a broad floor to walk and as a huge container of water so that ‘she could drink deeply, become like sand, change places with the bottom of the ocean, sitting in its fat-legged deepness and its immutable width’ (SS, 9). Also for the protagonist of “No Rinsed Blue Sky, No Red Flower Fences” the sea represents a potential space of safety and resistance:

The city was claustrophobic. [...] She needed a piece of water which led out, the vast ocean, salty and burning on the eyes. The feel of salt, blue and moving water, rushing past her ears and jostling her body, cleaning it, coming up a different person each time as she drove through a curling wave. [...] she always imagined and tasted that plunge into the sea, that collision with the ocean. Suddenly every two years she felt like leaving, going to dive into the ocean just once (SS, 87)

On the other hand, in the short story “St. Mary’s Estate” the protagonist has conflicting feelings towards the sea. As she returns to the decaying abandoned labour plantation where she spent her childhood, she watches the place through layers of time and memory and notices that ‘the sea is not rough or fantastic, nothing more stupendous than an ordinary beauty, ever rolling, ever present. The kind of sea to raise your eyes to from labour. This must have been the look toward the sea that slaves saw’ (SS, 45). She

admits that although the sight of the sea must have been comforting to enslaved Africans, the ocean did not offer a real alternative for them to escape their condition and they rather watched it with a 'look of envy' (SS, 45).

In Brand's novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, Elizete explores the city of Toronto walking through unknown streets guided only by her perception of the smell of the sea: 'She thought that she could smell the sea as she moved, [...] she thought that she was heading for the sea. But then she came to buildings with no people and a wide road' (IAPNH, 54). As in the Canadian metropolis she feels lost, unwanted and isolated, she unconsciously recalls the image of the ocean to reassure herself. In the same novel, Verlia's dream of 'riding out to the sea, a weeping sea, its eyes translucent, its tears glistening, going to some place so old there's no memory of' (IAPNH, 126) underlines the connection existing between exiled black diasporas and the "weeping" ocean whose waters hosted the horror of the Middle Passage.

In the novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, this connection achieves even a higher level as the ocean – besides being the repository of memory and history – also becomes a site manifesting destiny. The slave Marie Ursule has indeed a vision of the Atlantic Sea as a space of possibility inhabited by her descendants: 'When she looked into Bola's eyes she saw the sea. [...] Marie Ursule saw water in the child's eyes. So much water she dabbed it away, but more and more came. It wasn't tears, it was the sea' (ATF, 44-45) and 'there in the sea, in the middle of Bola's eyes, Marie Ursule saw skyscrapers and trains and machines and streets, she saw winters and summers and leaves falling in muddy roadways and on pavements [...] and she knew that it was the future she was looking at' (ATF, 45). Moreover, as Bola seems to have locked up the sea within herself and sea is where the memory of the history of Diaspora lies, she will be given the unfortunate role of a vessel of memory housing everything that must be remembered.

Moreover, also in this novel Brand depicts the sea as a comforting space of security for diasporic subjects to count on. Since the ghostly presences of the Ursuline nuns are not able to cross water, Bola escapes their presence by swimming far out in the ocean. 'Yet a step toward the sea and rusting spray and wind begin abruptly, undoing the spell of the Ursulines' (ATF, 41). The Ursuline nuns have no control on water, therefore Bola turns to the sea and the rock off shore as they are a safe place. Similarly, Adrian finds a shelter from the dreariness of his addiction to drugs and from the series of working failures, in his dreams fulfilled with watery images. Adrian 'slept and he dreamed of water, then he dreamed of the barren cactus-filled island he was from, and then he dreamed of water again, and again' (ATF, 193).

2.2 Nostalgia

Diaspora is closely entangled with trauma, which is partly constituted by loss. The ultimate loss for diasporic subjects is the connection to their roots, to their mother country. Diasporas retain and perpetuate a collective vision and myth about their original homeland and share a common longing for return. As Robin Cohen points out,²⁸ the diasporic experience is marked by a sort of idealization of the mother country as a safe welcoming place where one can heal the trauma of blackness and by the constant idea of returning to the homeland. Similarly, Achille Mbembe states that the imagination of members of diasporic communities is 'working on the memory of an Africa, a vast petrified song, deemed past and misunderstood.'²⁹

Brand herself in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, which is a poetic meditation on Eduardo Galeano's statement 'I'm nostalgic for a country that doesn't yet exist on a map' (A MAP, 52), explores the issue of origin and admits the obsessive presence of the

²⁸ Robin COHEN, 1997.

²⁹ Achille MBEMBE, "Time on the Move", in *On the Postcolony* ed. by MBEMBE Achille, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001, p.12.

idea of the motherland in the mind of every diasporic subject. She states: ‘Africa. It was the place we did not remember, yet it lodged itself in all conversations of who we were’ (A MAP, 16-17). She is well aware that diasporic subjects envision an African homeland that is merely idealized as it is derived from little historical memory and much pride in a legendary ancestral past. Brand admits that ‘very few family stories, few personal stories have survived among the millions of descendants of the trade. Africa is therefore a place strictly of the imagination – what is imagined therefore is gauzy, elliptical, generalized, vague narrative of place’ (A MAP, 25).

Africa is therefore ‘something that exists only in the mind of the diasporic subject – an idealization of a safe welcoming place made up of the memories and stories passed down from one family member to another. The perception of the mother country acquires an imaginative and figurative value and its often untrustworthy for it is ‘a memory resembling a memory of a thing that [one] remembered’ (A MAP, 121). Yet the imagined idealized homeland represents a pure, timeless alternative to the harsh reality of black diasporas’ lives and it is nostalgically longed for.

Nostalgic remembrance of the past and longing for home are very common emotional states among members of diasporic communities who are never wholly part of a particular location in space and a moment in time of either the homeland or the host country. A useful tool to construct an alternative historical reality created from the images of the golden past and from idealized recollections, nostalgia is employed by diasporic subjects to escape from a painful, disappointing existence.

Originating from the Greek words *nostos* (return home) and *algia* (pain, longing), the term “nostalgia” invokes home in its very meaning and implies homesickness and yearning for home. However, it does not only refer to a very personal feeling of longing for a place, or rather for the home that cannot be recovered, but also denotes ‘a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms

of our dreams.’³⁰ Professor and critic Rubenstein defines nostalgia as ‘the expression of yearning for an earlier time or place or a significant person in one’s history, the memory and significance of which or whom contributes to the sense of the self in the present moment.’³¹

An expression of grief and desire for something past or irrevocably lost, the absence of which causes significant emotional anguish in the present, nostalgia turns out to be a very problematic sentiment. Indeed, it is characterized by ‘loss and displacement, but it’s also a romance with one’s own fantasy’³² because the desired homeland and past are often a product of one’s own imagination. Since the “home” diasporic subjects are looking for and wish to return to cannot be recovered or might not even exist, the home they nostalgically evoke is mediated through sentimental renderings of memory, but rather than being a recollection, it’s an imaginative reconstruction of an idealised place. As Roberta Rubenstein writes ‘while homesickness refers to a spatial/geographical separation, nostalgia more accurately refers to a temporal one. Even if one is able to return to the literal edifice where s/he grew up, one can never truly return to the original home of childhood, since it exists mostly as a place in imagination.’³³

The treatment of the issue of nostalgia undergoes many changes throughout Brand’s literary production. It’s evident, in fact, that she assumes an ambivalent attitude towards this sentiment for she seems to experience an internal conflict between resisting and giving in to nostalgia. Although she is very wary of nostalgia and recognizes its fictitious nature as “a lie” (NLIN, 30), Brand – who moved to Canada at the age of seventeen – is unable to resist writing nostalgically about the Caribbeans. At any rate,

³⁰ Svetlana BOYM, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2011, p. XV.

³¹ Roberta RUBENSTEIN, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women’s Fiction*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, p. 13.

³² Svetlana BOYM, 2011, p. III.

³³ Roberta RUBENSTEIN, 2001, p. 4.

even if she does reveal a longing for her childhood and her Caribbean homeland, she proves to be aware that her African ancestral homeland will unavoidably have changed, be replaced, forgotten and even disappeared, and declares: ‘I cannot go back to where I came from. It no longer exists. It should not exist’ (A MAP, 90).

There are many instances in Brand’s narrative and poetry where she reveals and expresses nostalgia. In her writings, nostalgia for the Caribbean homeland is often triggered by memories of vibrant colours, succulent fruit and sunny weather that stand in contrast to the icy Canadian landscape. In *Winter Epigrams*, she admits that:

Two things I will not buy

In this city

Mangoes and

Poinsettia;

Exiled

I must keep a little self respect³⁴

The same nostalgic voice is also to be found in the collection *No Language is Neutral*, where Brand writes:

Dumbfounded I walk as if these sidewalks are a
place I’m visiting. Like a holy ghost, I package the
smell of zinnias and lady of the night, I horde the taste
of star apples and granadilla (NLIN, 28)

³⁴ Kamau E. BRATHWAITE, ‘Dionne Brand’s “Winter Epigrams”’. In *Canadian Literature / Littérature canadienne: a quarterly of criticism and review*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1985, p. 26.

In Brand's writing, the notion of nostalgia is tangled up with memories of the past, of the physical landscape, of tropical weather, of the mother figure and of her childhood. Despite being firm in considering nostalgia as fictitious and dishonest, there is a side of Brand who cannot help revealing nostalgic memories of the Caribbean and longing for the familiar things of her childhood. Brand shows indeed a binary division of the self: one side denies and refuses nostalgia, while the other longs for her past.

The colours, sounds, tastes and smells of the Caribbean homeland are nostalgically longed for by diasporic subjects living in foreign hostile countries. In *In Another Place, Not Here* Verlia realizes that 'she misses colour and nothing else. Simply. It is not food or rain or clothing or fresh water or whisky but she misses it like a drink, as if she's thirsty' (IAPNH, 200). In fact, in a cold November day in Toronto she find herself unexpectedly overwhelmed with memories of her Trinidadian home: she looks for the sea and thinks of tamarinds, of perfumed velvet and red pomeracs, of pools of purple dust, of pink mountains, of yellow mangoes, of red wet hibiscus.

In the same novel, Brand depicts the experience of nostalgia of Adela who is one of the many slaves who 'had not come here willingly looking for food or water or liking the way the place set off against the sky or even for hunger. [...] They had been taken. Plain. Hard. Rough' (IAPNH, 41). Her grieving and longing for the place she has been brutally taken from makes her curse everything with namelessness: she curses the place that 'could not yield to her grief' (IAPNH, 18) and the children 'she spill and spill so and she mothered not a one' (IAPNH, 19). Adela embodies a particular form of nostalgia as she does not only manifest a longing for the long gone past, but also a repudiation for her existence as an exiled. As Elizete notices 'the place she miss [Africa] must have been full and living and take every corner in she mind so when she reach, there was no more room for here' (IAPNH, 20).

In *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, nostalgia is a feeling which is ever present as the characters are connected more than through blood, they are intimately connected through a common origin marked by tragedy and displacement. As an example, Adrian is a broken man always on the move whose mind is set on the memory of his longed for homeland. As he lives a marginalized solitary existence, he tries to find some comfort in the memory of his past. For Adrian,

Home was his childhood – not the little house in Willemstad, not the island, but his childhood. Sweet and hot days when the sun hit you just on the left side of your forehead before you woke up and the whole day was like walking with a soft mark across your face. You felt yourself drying and seasoning in the sun, you felt that if you smiled your face would melt. So home didn't matter except for that, and that you couldn't have again anyway (ATF, 183)

Members of diasporic communities run the risk of finding themselves blocked in a status of entrapment and stillness as they are divided between the nostalgic desire to move backward to their past to rekindle it and the will to reclaim a new home and community in the present. Nostalgia can indeed represent an experience that produces personal and political paralysis and apathy. As a matter of fact, even when diasporic subjects are aware of the negative damaging implications of nostalgia, they are still not able to resist it.

In *What We All Long For* the protagonists' parents manifest nostalgia and longing for a lost remote past. Seldom expressing their nostalgia over Vietnam, Tuan and Cam Vu bore their children with long speeches about 'how life used to be "back home"' (WWALF, 20) and with 'descriptions of other houses, other landscapes, other skies, other trees' (WWALF, 20). The stable and romantic memories of pre-Civil War Vietnam help them to deal with the rapid overwhelming changes of their new life in

Canada. Similarly, Oku's parents show a nostalgic attitude towards their past and they are described as 'people who somehow lived in the near past and were unable or unwilling to step into the present' (WWALF, 190). In particular, Oku's father Fitz continually suggests that life was much better back "home", evoking a similar feeling of nostalgia as Tuan and Cam's. This state of in-betweenness, which causes pain and discomfort, is very risky for diasporic subjects who are not able to disentangle themselves from the past in order to live the future.

Although the burden of predecessors' nostalgia and longings can be transmitted inter-generationally, the second generation in *What We All Long For* maintains an anti-nostalgic attitude and focuses on living the present moment. As very often traditional habits do not apply to the new hosting culture, immigrants find it hard to maintain and perpetuate tradition. As a result, it is difficult for second-generation migrants to feel a bond to their heritage and ancestral tradition as any sense of connection and of rootedness to the country of origin ends up being irrevocably broken.

Brand makes a comparison between the different attitudes of first and second-generation migrants with respect to their approach to history. While the first generation is paralyzed by the feelings of nostalgia and longing for a lost unrecoverable past, the second generation lives in the present and is unable and unwilling to understand the nostalgic attitude of its predecessors. Members of the second generation migrants express a wish for an end of their parents' obsessive nostalgia: 'No more stories of what might have been, no more diatribes on what would never have happen back home, down east, down the islands, over the South China Sea, not another sentence that began in the past that had never been their past' (WWALF, 47). As their parents' history, as well as 'the Canadian history they are taught in class...it's not about them' (WWALF, 20), they express anger and frustration towards their parents' nostalgic attitude. Tuyen in particular rebels against Tuan and Cam's nostalgic attachment to the past and shows

through her art the way of struggling creatively and productively with nostalgia by both drawing inspiration from the past and her Vietnamese cultural heritage and by coming into terms with the present reality. Expressing both respect and criticism for her parents' culture, Tuyen tries to represent through her art not only her family's past haunting trauma, but also its new modern life in Canada.

Although Brand's texts turn to the past, they clearly demonstrate the uselessness of adopting an obsessive nostalgic attitude as it can lead to personal and political paralysis. As Rinaldo Walcott observes, in Brand's more recent body of work she refuses to give up to 'the easy nostalgia that has come to mark much immigrant writing.'³⁵ Marlene Goldman as well points out that Brand's diasporic narratives reject the model of the exile who is solely longing nostalgically for the lost origin.³⁶

Brand's use of nostalgia is rather aimed at enabling her diasporic characters – and possibly her audience as well – to confront, deal with and revise their relation to something that has been lost, whether in the real world or in themselves. Through this process of analysis, they might move beyond the mere feeling of melancholic nostalgia and reach a new degree of awareness about themselves and their position in the world. Moreover, Brand's characters deploy nostalgia to negotiate alternative ways of being and to imagine new forms of belonging to communities and places that have traditionally ignored and excluded them. As professor Gayatri Gopinath explains, for unrooted diasporic subjects, nostalgia is 'a means for imagining oneself within those spaces from which one is perpetually excluded or denied existence.'³⁷

³⁵ Rinaldo WALCOTT, *Black Like Who?*, Toronto: Insomniac Press, 1997, p. 45.

³⁶ Marlene GOLDMAN, 'Mapping the Door of No Return: Deterritorialization and the Work of Dionne Brand'. In *Canadian Literature*, Vancouver, Autumn 2004, Iss. 182, p. 13-29.

³⁷ Gayatri GOPINATH, 'Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion', in *Theorizing Diaspora* ed. by EVANS BRAZIEL Jana & MANNUR Anita, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p.275.

2.3 Trauma, Postmemory and Haunting

Trauma scholar Cathy Caruth defines trauma as ‘an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena’.³⁸ Since the traumatic experience is often unremembered and not accessible, it fails to be integrated into the survivor’s consciousness and therefore causes an elliptical repetitive haunting through flashbacks, dreams and intrusive thoughts. Trauma is not defined by the nature of the critical event per se, but rather by its damaging and delayed consequences and its impact on the individual. As Cathy Caruth points out, since the traumatic event is inaccessible to conscious recall and control, trauma ‘registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned’.³⁹ Directly affecting the psyche with a series of elliptical and repetitive series of memories and appearances, trauma goes beyond one’s perception and consciousness as it is something unconsciously registered in memory rather than something directly experienced. Trauma is a kind of phenomenon in which the overwhelming events of the past do not only repeatedly possess the one who has lived through them, but can also haunt the lives of the descendants.

I borrow the term postmemory from Marianne Hirsch, who uses it in the context of the Holocaust to describe ‘the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they “remember” only as the stories and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right.’⁴⁰ The traumatic events are internalized and indirectly “remembered” by trauma survivor’s descendants through a

³⁸ Cathy, CARUTH, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996, p.11.

³⁹ Cathy, CARUTH, 1996, p. 151.

⁴⁰ Marianne HIRSCH, ‘Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy’. In *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. by M. BAL, J. CREWE and L. SPITZER, Hanover: Up of New England, 1999, p. 8.

series of evidences, histories and reminders of their family's experiences. Postmemory is a powerful form of trans-generational mediated memory that recalls the structure and functions of memory – especially in its affective force –, but which is distinguished from memory because of the generational distance, and from history because of the direct personal connection. Hirsch explains that unlike memory, postmemory's 'connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through projection, investment and creation.'⁴¹ According to her, second-generation individuals can "remember" their parents' traumatic past although they have not lived through it or even have awareness of it. Their lives are deeply influenced and affected by their predecessors' traumatic stories that they can neither understand nor re-create.

Brand acknowledges that history – in particular the history of colonialism – is an inescapable fact that shapes and affects the lives of diasporic subjects. The trauma of the Middle Passage and of slavery casts 'a haunting spell on personal and collective consciousness in the Diaspora. Black experience in any modern city or town in the Americas is haunting. One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history proceeds. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives' (A MAP, 25). In her note narrative *A Map to the Door of No Return*, she shows her awareness and recognition of the condition of collective haunting of members of diasporic communities when saying: 'I knew that everyone here was unhappy and haunted in some way. Life spoke in the blunt language of brutality, even beauty was brutal. I did not know what we were haunted by at the time. [...] But I had visceral understanding of a wound much deeper than the physical, a wound which somehow erupted in profound self-disappointment, self-hatred, and disaffection' (A MAP, 11).

According to Brand, it is not possible for diasporic subjects to forget trauma and to completely transcend the hauntings of history. As the traumatic memory of the horrors

⁴¹ Marianne HIRSCH, 1999, p. 8.

of Diaspora and slavery is imprinted in the bodies and minds of diasporic individuals, it inevitably shapes and affects their lives. As an example, in Brand's novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, Marie Ursule's dramatic experience of forceful exile and slavery haunts and shapes the existences of her descendants even if they do not have any memory of it. With reference to the diasporic characters of her novels, in an interview with Rinaldo Walcott and Leslie Sanders, she admits that 'history hovers over them, whether they want it or not, whether they know it or not, whether they like it or not'.⁴² In the same interview she asserts that the past is 'something that hovers in our imaginations. And it repeats, and sometimes we can see it and sometimes we can't see it, and sometimes it's forgotten deliberately or unconsciously'.⁴³

In her collection of essays, Brand ponders on the haunting living condition of diasporic individuals and states: 'We were born thinking of travelling back. It is our singular preoccupation, we think of nothing else. I am convinced. We are continually uncomfortable where we are. We do not sleep easily, not without dreaming of travelling back. This must be the code written on the lining of my brain, go back, go back, like a fever, a pandemic scourging the Diaspora' (BOOS, 9). Also in *A Map to the Door of No Return* she focuses on the same issue and highlights that members of diasporic communities are haunted by nagging thoughts that obsess them during the day and do not let them sleep well at night. She states that her body 'is always alert; it does not doze off or sleep easy' (A MAP, 87) suggesting that insomnia is one of the direct consequences of the trauma haunting.

Brand's diasporic characters suffer from insomnia as well. In *In Another Place, Not Here*, Verlia admits that 'she can't remember ever sleeping soundly or without a fear' (IAPNH, 121) and that 'she could not sleep for the heaviness of her heart'

⁴² Rinaldo WALCOTT, Leslie SANDERS, 'At the Full and Change of CanLit: An Interview with Dionne Brand'. In *Canadian Women Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme*, Vol. 20, N.2, 2000, p. 24.

⁴³ Rinaldo WALCOTT, Leslie SANDERS, 2000, p. 24.

(IAPNH, 125). Moreover Elizete refers that ‘Verlia could never sleep. And at four in the mornings she must have been most lonely and most awake’ (IAPNH, 100). Verlia is haunted by her past that intrudes upon her dreams with the spectres of dead black men she met during her childhood. In order to stop this haunting she decides ‘never to sleep again. But to grow up and go away and disregard or hide or at least the spectres of their movement in her memory. For they existed like spectres, [...] she closed them out at the first sign of their corporeality’ (IAPNH, 125-126). Also Tuyen’s parents in *What We All Long For* suffer from insomnia as their sleep is disturbed by the haunting ghostly presence of their lost son Quy. Tuan affirms that ‘he could not always endure his wife’s insomnia, which was not as restful as his, but a continuous pacing, throughout which she went over again and again the scene at the bay when they both lost sight of Quy’ (WWALF, 113).

As diasporic subjects inherit their ancestors’ traumatic histories, they live a haunting condition in which recollections and images from the past pervade the present. The characters in Brand’s novels are ‘surrounded so by spirits, history, ancestors’ (BOOS, 9) and often have to deal with the disturbing presence of their ancestors’ ghosts. In *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, Marie Ursule’s great granddaughter Eula perceives many ghostly presences: one night when she is about to sleep, she sees the ghost of her dead mother sitting on her bed and suddenly feels peaceful; while another day as she is walking at the back of a building she detects a disturbing ghostly presence at her back as if ‘someone is walking behind [her] and [she] turn[s] around and there is no one’ (ATF, 234). Similarly, Eula’s mentally-ill daughter Bola lives in an abandoned house haunted by numerous ghosts including that of her unknown ancestor Marie Ursule who arrives as a visitor limping ‘as if one foot was sore’ (ATF, 285) and who has ‘a heavy ring around her ankle and a rope around her throat’ (ATF, 285). Actually, after the failure of an attempt of revolt, Marie Ursule was sentenced to wear

an iron ring on her leg for two years and afterwards ‘the memory of that ring of iron hung on, even after it was removed. A ghost of pain around her ankle. An impression. It choreographed her walk and her first thoughts each day’ (ATF, 4). Moreover, in *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, Adrian and his sister Maya are haunted by the ghostly obsessive presence of their father Dovett who not only ‘filled the rooms of the house with his dense needs’ (ATF, 216), but also filled ‘the island with its heaviness’ (ATF, 217).

With reference to the psychoanalytic theories of trauma, Erica Johnson in *Unforgetting Trauma: Dionne Brand’s Haunted Histories*,⁴⁴ argues that ghosts are not only the representation of an unremembered trauma unwittingly inherited from one’s ancestors, but also the appearance of the silenced lost histories of the past. Cut out from the official historical record, the experience of the victims of colonialism and slavery were long silenced, unheard and forgotten. As a result, those who experienced the brutality of the Middle Passage and of slavery reappear as haunting presences in order to fill up the void of their lost past and to have their descendants recover and commemorate their forgotten and silenced histories.

2.4 Representations of history, trauma and nostalgia in Brand’s novels

An example of haunting is to be found in Brand’s first novel *In Another Place, Not Here* where the main characters are marked by the severe scars of slavery which they all bear in spite of having been raised in free countries during the second half of the twentieth century. The past deeply influences the present of diasporic individuals, marking their existence with the consequences of a history of imperialism and domination. In this novel Brand focuses in fact on the ‘representation of the profound

⁴⁴ Erica JOHNSON, ‘Unforgetting Trauma: Dionne Brand’s Haunted Histories’. In *Anthurium, A Caribbean Studies Journal*, Vol. 2, Miami: University of Miami, Spring 2004, Iss. 1.

and deep-rooted physic and psychological effects of slavery'⁴⁵ for they still persist in contemporary forms of oppression and exploitation.

Although more than a century has passed since the abolition of labour exploitation and slavery, the village where sugarcane-cutter Elizete lives seems still to be permeated by the atmosphere of slave life and plantation society. Like her ancestors during slavery, the peasant woman feels trapped in an existence dominated by the backbreaking work in the plantations – a form of agricultural labour that nowadays is generally considered to be anachronistic –, the fear of corporal punishments, and the impossibility of a better future. European colonialism has indeed marked – and continues to mark – the lives of Elizete's countrymen who cannot 'remember when they wasn't here' (IAPNH, 8) and have to face daily discrimination and oppression. Therefore, it's no surprise that Elizete's main desire is to run and escape from the reality of brutality and suffering in which she is caught and from the captivity and daily violence of 'the man they gave [her] to' (IAPNH, 7), Isaiah Ferdinand.

As Christian Olbey and Pamela McCallum (1999) point out, there is a clear interlinking between Elizete's desire to escape from her painful existence in the Caribbean and black slaves' wish for flight and longing for freedom. Moreover, they suggest that the character's expectations about migrating to Toronto reflect the slaves' widespread perception of North American and European countries as lands of economic and social opportunity. At any rate, this persistent utopian notion is deconstructed by the description of Elizete's experience of racism, rejection and marginalization in Canada. The depiction of the hard work in sweatshops that Elizete performs in different factories in Toronto – which parallels the harshness of her backbreaking activity as a cane-cutter in Grenada –, reflects the persistence of forms of colonial exploitation and domination.

⁴⁵ Pamela MC CALLUM, Christian OLBEY, 'History, Genre and Materiality in Dionne Brand's "In Another Place, Not Here"'. In *Essays on Canadian Writing*, Toronto, Summer 1999, Iss. 68, p. 166.

The individual story of Elizete is representative for the collective experience of all the ‘Third World people going to the white man country’ (IAPNH, 60) searching for a utopia that do not exist, but must be struggled for.

The history of colonialism and slavery is inscribed in the Caribbean island where Elizete grows up. She acknowledges the existence of ghostly haunting presences in the island: ‘And the living, they lived in the past or had no past but a present that was filled, peopled with the past. No matter their whims and flights into the future some old face or old look, some old pain would reappear’ (IAPNH, 44). At any rate, the echoes of colonization are not only present in the Caribbean island, but in Canada as well where Elizete while taking a ride on the bus on Jane Street in Toronto hears ‘the ringing in [her] ears of iron bracelets on stone, the ancient wicked music of chain’ (IAPNH, 65).

As a matter of fact, the traumatic experience of colonialism and slavery is not merely inscribed in the landscape and the societies, but it is recorded in the bodies and minds of members of diasporic communities. As diasporic subjects unwittingly bring with them the memories and the lasting scars of the colonial past, they are not able to get rid of their haunting history by simply leaving. History is therefore haunting and inescapable and as Verlia writes down in her diary: ‘It’s the fact. Fact. Fact. Intangible fact of this place. It’s not possible to get rid of that. So much would have to have not happened. It’s like a life sentence. Call it what we want – colonialism, imperialism – it’s a fucking life sentence’ (IAPNH, 215).

In *In Another Place, Not Here* Verlia is haunted by a persistent state of fear and anxiety that torments her and as a result ‘she can’t remember ever sleeping soundly or without a fear’ (IAPNH, 121). In her own diary she admits that ‘It’s really some colonial shit happening with me. All this fear for a place I should know. I feel very nervous here’ (IAPNH, 208). Brand herself in her note narrative *A Map to the Door of No Return*, investigates the causes of her omnipresent status of anxiety. She recognizes

that the feeling of fear is not merely linked with the uneasiness of living in an inhospitable community that exclude and mistrust her, but it is rather a condition that has more profound roots. She explains that ‘Burnt River, summer or winter, is not sufficient to explain my present fear. My fear has particular origin’ (A MAP, 155).

As scholars Christian Olbey and Pamela McCallum observe, this atmosphere of dread and constant anxiety is widespread among members of diasporic communities. In *In Another Place, Not Here* Verlia notices that:

all of them – her family and the people who lived all around – were also moving in this nightmare with these arms around them and thought hers was insomnia and theirs a sore foot or the urge to chew the passée of coconut constantly or walking with a limp when nothing was wounded or the inability to keep a job or not being able to stay out of jail, they all, these movements, these hurts, had the same look to them. All of them had something they could not remember but made excuses for. Their bodies and the acts they committed everyday fell into this attitude, this nightmare, so frequently and intensely, they forgot even longing to be awake (IAPNH, 146-147)

Verlia’s family and the other inhabitants of the doomed village accept the omnipresent atmosphere of dread as a natural condition, as something given that cannot be altered and they are ‘trapped in an existence in which the future is blocked, always in fear of whipping and more terrible punishments, always on guard for the irrational outbursts of an overseer’s anger, [...] [they] negotiate a lifeworld shot through with anxiety’.⁴⁶

Verlia instead does not accept this living condition and rather ‘wants to run. She does not want to climb into grief any more, the grief waiting for her in their tumbling tumbling life. The grief that does not end or begin and its wide and its wide wide and

⁴⁶ Pamela MC CALLUM, Christian OLBHEY, 1999.

haunts' (IAPNH, 147). As scholar Bina Toledo Freiwald argues, she does not only dream of escaping the doomed place cursed by history where she was born, but also of fleeing the 'spaces to which memory so stubbornly clings: place, family, the body, and so ultimately life itself'.⁴⁷ She wants to escape space and time altogether and as a child she dreams of 'riding out to the sea, [...] going to some place so old there's no memory of it' (IAPNH, 126) and she expresses her desire 'to live, exist or be herself in some other place, less confining, less pinned down, less tortuous, less fleshy' (IAPNH, 127).

Verlia leaves her Caribbean island at the age of seventeen and moves to Canada where she seeks to construct for herself affective and physical spaces emptied out of memory and to satisfy the simple formula 'no family, no grief' (IAPNH, 160). Moving into a room in Bathurst, she decides 'she'll never furnish this room. [...] She wants it bare, everything bare. No photographs, no sentiment, no memory. Everything down to the bone' (IAPNH, 156).

While in Toronto Verlia becomes involved in the Black Power movements of the 1970s and the 1980s that promise 'escape from all the bodies and places that tie you down, an escape into the liberating anonymity of revolutionary space/time/self'.⁴⁸ She becomes an activist and follows the example of her heroes – Karl Marx, Nina Simone, Gandhi, Fidel Castro, Mao Tze Tung, Cassius Clay, James Brown and many others – that become 'her new past' (IAPNH, 164). Carefully stored in a shoe box hidden under her bed, this collection of drawings and portrays of political leaders and cultural figures represents both the pressures and the possibilities that mould her thought and existence, and her commitment to the achievement of social and political transformation in the Caribbean. As the images mainly depict individuals or groups whose actions lead to

⁴⁷ Bina Toledo FREIWALD, 'Cartographies of Be/Longing: Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*'. In *Mapping Canadian Cultural Space: Essays in Canadian Literature*, ed. by D. SCHAUB, Jerusalem: The Hebrew U Magnes P, 2000, p. 45.

⁴⁸ Bina Toledo FREIWALD, 2000, p. 47.

positive results and improvements in the past, for Verlia they represent a hope for the future as they could serve as examples, guide and inspiration for contemporary struggles. She states in fact, 'if only for a moment or a fortnight at the most, they'd spring to life in the glow of those clippings or in rumours of some setoff coloured people somewhere beating some colonial power down' (IAPNH, 164).

After many years, she returns to her homeland to help the sugarcane workers to shake off the oppressive exploitative colonial system still common in the island. In an extreme act of anti-colonial resistance during the Grenadian revolution, Verlia leaps off a cliff: 'she's flying out to the sea and in the emerald she sees the sea, its eyes translucent, its back solid going to some place so old there's no memory of it. She's leaping. She's tasting her own tears and she is weightless and deadly. [...] Her body is cool, cool in the air. Her body has fallen away, is just a line, an electric current, the sign of lighting left after lighting, a faultless arc to the deep turquoise deep. She doesn't need air. She's in some other place already, less tortuous, less fleshy' (IAPNH, 246-247) Her last act functions as an extreme fatal gesture of escape from 'all the spaces that bound and bind: from history, family, family, place, the body, and ultimately life itself'.⁴⁹ It is the heavy burden of colonial history that drives Verlia to self-forgetting and ultimately to death. Brand indeed seems to suggest that there is no escape from one's haunting past and that the only possible escape is represented by death.

At any rate, unlike Verlia, Elizete makes an attempt to resist and fix the rupture in history by mapping and naming everything she finds on her doomed native island and by reconstituting herself through willfull remembering. An orphan who is completely cut off from her past and who seems to have arrived under a Samaan tree directly from nowhere, Elizete performs the simple act of naming to explore different ways of belonging, to restore a connection to the island she lives in and to fight against the

⁴⁹ Bina Toledo FREIWALD, 2000, p. 38.

burden of her past. Her behaviour is in total opposition to the attitude of Adela – a woman forcibly brought from Africa to the Caribbean island long before Elizete was born – who manifests her despair and her feeling of alienation and disconnection by refusing to learn the names of places and plants and even to name her own children. Besides manifesting her nostalgic longing for her past and her repudiation of her existence as an exiled slave by the act of unnamings everything, Adela tries to get rid of the burden of her past by forgetting it. ‘Everything after the narrow passage to the new world, the tunnel to the ship where only one body could pass, everything after the opening, the orange rim of dirt, jutting at her eye, which was the rest and first of what she was, she lose’ (IAPNH, 21-22). By forgetting the route of the Middle Passage, Adela tries to repress and even forget her traumatic personal experience, but she is not able to elude the enduring feeling of loss and longing that she – as well as the other members of the Black Diaspora – experiences. Adela’s curse of namelessness and rejection of place is transmitted to and continues to plague future generations. As an example, the woman who takes care of Elizete – who is Adela’s great-great-great granddaughter – remains unnamed and grows a plentiful garden in which not a single plant is named.

Mentally confronting with Adela, Elizete affirms ‘where you see nowhere, I must see everything. Where you leave all that emptiness I must fill up’ (IAPNH, 24). As scholar Bina Toledo Freiwald argues ‘Adela had calculated in vain to locate herself solely in relation to that lost place of origin; learning from Adela’s fatal nostalgia, Elizete resolves to make herself in this place, and make this place her by naming it.’⁵⁰ The simple act of naming represents a means of reclaiming the past in a way that it may have the potential to fix the rupture in history, to empower the present and to open up the new possibilities for the future.

⁵⁰ Bina Toledo FREIWALD, 2000, p. 49.

Brand adopts a much more negative perspective in her following novel for she seems to suggest that no matter what a diasporic subject does, he/she can never fully transcend the burden of Diaspora and colonial history. A haunted novel in which history loops and repeats, *At the Full and Change of the Moon* represents the corporeal as well as the psychological impact of trauma in a transgenerational context. The lives of Marie Ursule's descendants are unwittingly interconnected and inextricably linked to her personal terrible experience of forceful exile and slavery. As scholar Erica Johnson notices, the horror of Marie Ursule's story is a source of psychological and transgenerational haunting that 'continues to have undeniably real effects on individual lives. [...] Whether the event is recalled or not, it acts upon Marie Ursule and her descendants.'⁵¹ Her traumatic experience of sacrifice and suffering haunts and shapes the lives of next generations no matter if they do not have any memory of it. For example, with reference to her attempts at fitting in Western society during her university years, her descendant Eula admits: 'I was afraid of what would come out of my mouth. I was afraid that it would seem unintelligent and some days I simply wanted to curse, to spit at the whole room of people and at the teacher. I felt burning, the front of my chest and my head was consumed in anger and I wanted to curse. I don't know why' (ATF, 238). Similarly Eula's unknown cousin Adrian dramatically describes the unwarranted grief he feels every day:

Every day you wake up and there's something trying to break your heart. Not a day there isn't something just waiting there lashing your blood right open. Not a day he hadn't awakened and something wasn't hurting him. [...] How would he explain something cracking in heart like a stiff door opening to let in something you don't want? How would he explain that? And how would he tell him he didn't know where it came from, this spoon dipping out his heart like

⁵¹ Erica JOHNSON, 2004.

emptying a bowl, how would anyone feel like that, know it enough to feel it when he himself didn't understand it, just that he got up lonely every day and every day something was waiting to break his heart so much he had to clamp it shut quick or pick it up piece by breaking piece (ATF, 175)

In order to bridge the gap existing between the unknown fact causing grief and the traumatic painful memory of it, Brand begins the novel by representing the critical event which constitutes the source of haunting. She depicts the terrible episode of the poisoning of Marie-Ursule and of other slaves in Mon Chagrin cane-field plantation to underline that all future generations will have to confront with that horrifying extreme act of liberation.

The only survivor of the mass-suicide is Marie Ursule's three years old daughter, whose watery eyes offers an image of a visionary future in which a 'line of children stretched out unending on the beach' (ATF, 298). As Marie Ursule foresees the 'big ragged map of the world' (ATF, 44) in Bola's eyes, she decides to send her child away with Kamena and save her from the planned death. At any rate, Marie Ursule is so devastated by slavery that she ends up sending her daughter to the only place she can think of: the Ursuline plantation in Culebra Bay. She is unable to leave her daughter with anything but a memory of the ocean and of her enslavement. Before giving her child to Kamena, she 'remembered the last thing she had to dream. The two miserable nuns in Culebra Bay whom she had set in stone. Dead now perhaps, dead to the world but not to her vision. Their evanescence thickening into sight, she called their mystery into shape. If Kamena could not find Terre Bouillante, then she would lead him to Culebra Bay' (ATF, 16).

As Kamena is caught in the haunting memories of the Middle Passage, his search for the Maroon settlement in Terre Bouillante turns out to be futile and

ineffective. Indeed, as Brand points out: ‘Some of us does not recover from the sight, the wound of our heavy black bodies sinking in water’ (ATF, 59). In “Unforgetting Trauma: Dionne Brand’s Haunted Histories”, scholar Erica Johnson argues that in Kamena’s case memory is replaced by the dynamic of haunting. As a result, in order to arrive to his desired destination, Kamena must not remember the route to Terre Bouillante, but has rather to become a ghost – the ghost of the Kamena who previously run away from Mon Chagrin estate and arrived there as an escaped slave – and to embody and re-experience that past event. Anyway, although ‘Kamena acquired its ghostliness’ (ATF, 32), he loses his way, is not able to return to the Maroon settlement and keeps circling himself. He ‘never finds what he is looking and longing for, it eludes him, it dissembles, all of his directions lead him nowhere’ (ATF, 202). Kamena requires Bola to remember his directions by saying ‘Hold this for me’ (ATF, 59), but with this emblematic request he does not only ask her to remember nonsensical geographical points on an imagined map, but also to remember and hold his trauma.

Bola occupies a paradoxical position: on the one hand she is a vessel of memory and a collector of inheritance who witnesses her parents’ traumatic histories; on the other hand she is a figure of forgetting who refuses to testify and share these histories with anybody. Indeed, many years later her great granddaughter Eula is mesmerized by the drawing of Culebra Bay made by Bola and questions why ‘there is no one in the drawing but the rock, the ocean, the far shore and man-o’-war birds in the air. She had so many children, so many lovers, so much life, I wonder why this is all she drew’ (ATF, 254). Consumed by the image of the seashore and by the recollection of Marie Ursule, Bola carries with her the weight of a memory and of a past she does not remember and therefore she can’t represent anything else in the drawing.

Bola inherits her mother’s haunted geography and escapes to the ruins of the Ursulines’ plantation in Culebra Bay where Marie Ursule was enslaved by the nuns.

The Ursulines' estate is a place 'imagined over and over again. Each fragment belonging to a certain mind – a reverie, a version – each fragment held carelessly or closely. Which is why it still exists. Nothing happened here. [...] It is the others, the ones they held, who keep the memory, who imagine over and over again where they might be. It is they who keep these details alive and raw like yesterday' (ATF, 42-43). Over there she has to live with the disturbing presences of the ghosts of Mère Marguerite de St. Joseph and Soeur de Clèmy which she perceives more than a century after their death. 'The two Ursulines have been hovering and multiplying. Long after, they are still. They are dead [...]. All, died. Except, nothing dies. Nothing disappears with finality along this archipelago. Time is a collection of forfeits and damages. Colonies of life's acts inhabit time here' (ATF, 37). The trauma inflicted to Marie Ursule by the Ursuline nuns does not end and disappear with their death, but it rather comes back to haunt her daughter embodied in the ghost of the two nuns. 'A story Marie Ursule once told Bola' (ATF, 40), the Ursulines are 'only a ghost, a remembrance' (ATF, 42) alien to her own experience, yet they are concrete pestering presences in her childhood. Her settlement in the ruins of the plantation in Culebra Bay and her long-lasting contact with the ghosts of the Ursuline nuns stresses her intimate connection with the terrible forces that ruined her mother's life.

The trauma passed down from Marie Ursule to her daughter Bola is also passed down to future generations and manifests itself differently with each character. Moreover, it is not simply Marie Ursule's traumatic experience of slavery that future generations have to deal with, but also new forms of oppressions. As Erica Johnson argues, 'each of these children is possessed by a phantom, made manifest primarily though the common experience of exile. That is, the psychic exile experienced by Marie Ursule and Kamena becomes manifest in their descendants through a proliferating

narrative of exile'.⁵² All characters in *At the Full and Change of the Moon* experience exile not only as a physical and geographical dispersal of the family throughout the western world, but also as an existential condition due to the unconscious inheritance of their ancestors' traumas. "Exile" is indeed experienced in the same way both by individuals living in hostile environments in Europe or North America, and by those still living in the Caribbean islands.

As the horror of Marie Ursule's history has repercussions that are transmitted inter-generationally, all characters in the novel are haunted, broken and lost: Prist acknowledges that he and her sister Eula have sudden and unmotivated 'moments of rage and depression' (ATF, 133), Cordelia lives 'in a never-ending bitterness' (ATF, 122), Adrian affirms that 'his whole life felt like a mistake' (ATF, 183) and depicts the haunting condition of the descendants of the Black Diaspora:

The blocks from Dam Square to the station were littered with men like him – men from everywhere, ducking into coats even though it was June, a coldness running through them, exiting and entering the streets off the square in swift movements. Going nowhere like him, trying to figure out the next bit of money, the next laugh, the next fix. A debris of men selling anything, anything they could get their hands on. Dam Square seemed haunted, though it was bustling, haunted by these scores of men changing into other men, who looked the same. Haunted shifts of them from Curacao, Surinam, Africa [...] Here he was like Kamena trying to find a destination (ATF, 180)

The destructive effect of Marie Ursule's haunting trauma is evident in the tragic story of Bola's grandson Samuel Sones who is discriminated against in the army and is used as a commodity. Having no ancestral roots or familiar heritage by which he might shape his identity, Samuel is alienated from himself, subscribes to European models of

⁵² Erica JOHNSON, 2004.

living and fantasises of himself as English. He lives indeed for the pursuit of ‘going to Great Britain, going home to the mother country’ (ATF, 76) and of disappearing ‘into the English countryside with a milk-white woman’ (ATF, 86). Faced with racial discrimination and the impossibility of realizing his dream, Samuel rebels against his commanding officer De Freitas – the man who had once shown him an image of English countryside on which he had built all his fantasies for the future. Dismissed for misconduct from the army, Samuel is a broken human being who wanders a repeated path to and from the Tamarindus Inca tree that stands as a symbol for his broken heritage.

Another example of the legacy of inherited trauma is to be found in the letter Eula writes from Canada to her dead mother. She attempts to explain the fragmentation in which her family finds itself as a consequence and continuity of what had happened centuries before. She is aware of the present being a reflection and continuation of the past and writes:

History opens and closes, Mama. I was reading a book the other day about the nineteenth century and it seemed like reading about now. I think we forget who we were. Nothing is changing, it is just that we are forgetting. All centuries past may be one long sleep. We are either put to sleep or we choose to sleep. Nothing is changing, we are just forgetting. I am forgetting you, but it is work, forgetting (ATF,234)

No matter if the act of writing a letter to her dead mother stresses a strong connection to the past and the incapacity of letting the past go, the act of forgetting is of vital importance for Eula as it represents an attempt to survive. Her statement ‘The more I write the more I forget. Perhaps that is why I never wrote until now, perhaps I need to forget you now’ (ATF, 239) sounds like a well-conceived resolute intention to get rid of

part of the burden of her memory by entrusting it to her mother. For example, she tries to free herself from painful memories of her past – such as her brother’s abuses when she was a child or her unsuccessful studying and working career as a young girl – by sharing some of her personal secret histories with her dead mother. In the letter Eula states that she ‘hate[s] the past and for that matter the present’ (ATF, 255) and later adds that members of diasporic communities ‘are a tragedy [...] A whole broken-up tragedy, standing in the middle of the world cracking’ (ATF, 258). The “broken-up tragedy” she makes reference to is the dramatic condition of living of African diasporic cultures that experience a rupture in history and in identity as they are ‘Wreckage, Mama, pure wreckage. The street is full of human wreckage, breakage and ruin’ (ATF, 241).

Dealing daily with the pain of exile and the isolation of modern life, Eula is well aware of the tragic inheritance passed down to new generations in diasporic families and tries to guarantee better life conditions to her child. She indeed decides to send her daughter Bola “to the past” (ATF, 247), to be raised by her grandmother. Eula’s need to forget is made clear once again as she asks her mother not to ‘saddle her [Bola] with memory that’s not hers’ (ATF, 250). Her resolution does not save her daughter Bola from the devastating corrosive effect of trans-generational haunting: Bola thinks of herself as a vessel of memory, brings with her all the ghosts of the past and although time passes in the story, she remains trapped in her illusory childhood. As Erica Johnson states, she ‘is overwhelmed by memory in the sense that she spends her entire life rehearsing her childhood in order to freeze time in a moment before her grandmother’s death’.⁵³ She exiles herself from the living world and decides to confine herself in her family’s abandoned house and spend her time with the ghost of her beloved dead grandmother who she thinks of as her mother.

⁵³ Erica JOHNSON, 2004.

Unlike the migrants who generally try to forget, Bola admits: 'My sisters are forgetful, but I remember everyone. Our mother said that I had a good memory and she would give me little things to remember for her. I am full of memories for her' (ATF, 289-290). She suffers from the consequences of trauma and shows symptoms of insanity such as the estrangement from the members of her family and the misrecognition of her own face and voice. She is estranged by her own reflection in the mirrors and acknowledges: 'I was disturbed by the mirrors underneath. They had turned into jumbies and I knew every time I passed by them, I knew that they were not mirrors anymore. I had glimpsed someone there' (ATF, 283).

Moreover she is even alienated from language and she admits: 'the words my mother read were in gibberish and I had to put g's and l's back in to understand. Deagelar, Magalama, Hogolope yogolo argarla wegelell agalan egelenjoygoloyigiling thegle begelest ogolof hegeleath' (ATF, 283). Her haunted, insane and static condition of living works as a sort of warning about the possible implications of not letting go the past and living in one's own memories.

In *At the Full and Change of the Moon* Brand represents the horror of a history of slavery and exile and shows how its repercussions are transmitted inter-generationally suggesting that the traces of trauma cannot be erased. Although Marie Ursule saves her daughter Bola imagining a healthy safe future for her and the future generations, Brand shows that subjects who experienced a history of trauma and oppression are not necessarily destined to a better future and neither are their descendants.

As an example, Marie Ursule's great-great grandson Priest acknowledges that 'the good life wasn't for him anyway, [...] the good life, and when it was within reach he said fuck it. He couldn't hold on to it anyway, he wasn't made for it, he was made to trawl the bottom of life, so fuck it. You couldn't turn bad things good' (ATF, 136). For

Brand in fact one can never fully transcend the hauntings of history as the trauma of slavery and diaspora is imprinted in the bodies and minds of diasporic subjects and therefore inevitably affects their existences.

Also in her most recent novel *What We All Long For*, Brand exemplifies how the past continues to occupy the present and to haunt and shape the lives of diasporic subjects. As Diana Brydon points out, ‘diasporic presents are not only haunted by memories from the past, but also are more fundamentally inhabited by the multiple ways in which the past lives on in the present’.⁵⁴

The whole life of the Vietnamese Vu family is deeply influenced by a haunting trauma. Tuyen’s parents Cam and Tuan have never recovered from an unfortunate past incident: the traumatic loss of their son Quy in the South China Sea during their hurried dangerous flight out of Vietnam. Feeling extremely guilty, they suffer from depression and insomnia, they torture themselves in arguments about whether they challenged the fate by calling him Quy,⁵⁵ they spend great amounts of money trying to find him and they blame themselves for not having been able to keep their son with them. As other trauma survivors, they re-experience the traumatic moment repeatedly in their heads in an attempt to fix it and make things right. Cam in particular keeps going over the event in her head ‘trying to alter the sequence of events so that she would arrive at herself in the present with her family and her mind intact’ (WWALF, 113). Moreover, as the years goes by the devastation of this loss does not soften, but rather increases for they seem to realize that the more success they achieve – socially and financially -, the more the poor boy is denied.

⁵⁴ Diana BRYDON, “‘A Place on the Map of the World’: Locating Hope in Shani Mootoo’s *He drown She in the Sea* and Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For*”. In *MaComère*, Toronto: Ryerson University, Vol. 8, 2006.

⁵⁵ Quy means “precious” in Vietnamese language.

Quy is the embodiment of the destructive side of memory: the act of constantly remembering the idealized lost son consumes the Vu family from within. His loss casts a melancholic shadow over his parents, who succumb to the devastating grief and become metaphorically paralyzed. Nevertheless, the experience of the trauma does not only affect the lives of Cam and Tuan, but also repeats itself unrelentingly through the actions of the second generation as both Tuyen's two older sisters and her Canadian-born brother Binh live under the pressure of the haunting presence of their missing elder brother. As Tuyen points out, 'Lam and Ai were reminders [...] of their parents' past, their other life; the life that was cut in half one night on a boat to Hong Kong' (WWALF, 59). Moreover, she adds 'Lam and Ai had become shadows, two little girls forgotten in the wrecked love of their parents. At times Lam had felt wrong for surviving, wrong for existing in the face of their parents' tragedy' (WWALF, 59). Binh bitterly states that Quy 'not having to do anything, never failed at anything. And who, not having a physical presence, could never be scrutinized for flaws and mistakes. That mythic brother grew in perfection' (WWALF, 122).

As Rachel Mordecai points out,⁵⁶ Quy's haunting presence is amplified by a clever literary trick: his sections are told in the first person, while all the others are told in third person. As a result, being the only character of the novel who speaks for himself, he manifests his obsessing presence also to the reader. Tuyen too acknowledges the oppressive ghostly presence of her brother during her childhood by describing how she always felt observed by Quy since his chilling photographs 'looked at her from every mantel, every surface' (WWALF, 267).

Nevertheless, as she believes that her tragic familial past must be forgotten along with the memory of Quy, she is the only member of the Vu family who manages to

⁵⁶ Rachel L MORDECAI, 'On Inventory and What We All Long For by Dionne Brand'. In *The Caribbean Review of Books*, Trinidad and Tobago: MEP, Iss. 9, August 2006.

overcome the familial trauma and to escape from the haunting presence of Quy by transforming the unspoken grief of the loss and absence of her older brother into an inspiration for her art.

Inspired by Surrealism and by the Oriental tradition, she creates a huge art installation which she models on the typical Chinese signposts where traditionally messages against the government were pinned on. She decorates her *lubaio* with photographs, videos, bits of woods, pieces of cloth and the letters her mother had desperately and hopefully written trying to find Quy which Tuyen sees as ‘ornate and curious things of a time past’ (WWALF, 25). Moreover, by collecting an archive of people’s longings for her art installation, Tuyen transforms herself in a ‘compassionate listener of the diasporic traumas of the previous generations, empathic conduit and translator for the lives and experiences surrounding her’.⁵⁷

Tuyen’s parents are not the only characters in *What We All Long For* who need to come to terms with their loss to go forward in their lives. Her friend and flatmate Carla grasps on the memory of her dead mother Angie and builds her entire life around the dramatic event of her mother’s suicide. Obsessed by the haunting memory of her mother Angie, Carla imagines over and over again the tragic day when her mother stepped off the balcony of her house. She remembers every detail of the scene: she was five at that time, she was ‘singing along with the radio, “Trains and boat and planes...”’.

She had a pencil in one hand and a last mouthful of doughnut in the other and she was conducting an invisible choir’ (WWALF, 103). She even remembers the exact words of her mother last request: ‘Carla, stop that noise, sweetie, and come here hold the baby. [...] Okay, take him inside now. Careful, careful. Hold him carefully’ (WWALF, 103-104). As Carla feels a deep connection to and devotion for her beloved

⁵⁷ Pilar CUDER-DOMINÍGUEZ, ‘Portraits of the Artist in Dionne Brand’s “What We All Long For” and Madeleine Thien’s “Certainty”’. In *Crosstalk: Canadian and Global Imaginaries in Dialogue*, ed. by D. BRYDON, M. DVOŘÁK, Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010, p. 17.

mother, she still feels in charge of the task Angie gave her and shows a great responsibility for her younger scoundrel brother Jamal.

In *What We All Long For*, Brand brings to an even higher level the demonstration of Diaspora as always involving trauma and loss. Diasporic people do not only lose tangible possessions such as their houses, their goods, their money, their job; but also more abstract assets. In this novel, loss is viscerally represented by the dramatic haunting figure of Quy.

At any rate, Brand seems more optimistic than in her earlier writing for she suggests that no matter if the influences of the past keep on shaping and affecting the present, there is the possibility of working on the present to make things better for the future. The novel shows once again the uselessness and riskiness of holding on to the memories of the past and the importance of maintaining an openness towards difference and the future.

In her body of work, Brand embodies and represents the experience and legacy of the trauma of the African Diaspora. She does not only depict this impact on subjects who experienced it in first person, but also shows how its aftermath has affected – and keeps affecting – the lives of the next generations.

In her writings, Brand oscillates between the past and the present, between the imagined and the real happenings. She reveals an extraordinary ability to make history living and concrete by blending the simple ordinary things of life and personal happenings together with broader historical events.

As Christian Olbey notices in fact, in Brand's texts 'the distant past (the sufferings of and resistances to slavery, the colonization of the Caribbean) is layered onto the more recent past (the impasses reached by 1960s movements in North America, the brutal US

invasion and repression of Grenada in October 1983) to produce a vivid sense of overlapping and interlinked stories.’⁵⁸

Both in her writings and in the interviews she granted, Brand shows that her project is that of “unforgetting”. According to Erica Johnson, Brand’s goal of unforgetting history ‘addresses the extent to which the histories and individual stories of African diasporic experience have been stricken from written historical record’.⁵⁹ As diasporic individuals were forgotten and left out from dominant white-centred historical representations, were denied their agency and did not have the privilege of writing their own histories to be shared with the public, their voice is left unheard, forgotten and even lost.

In order to have a different perspective and a counter-history to oppose to the dominant hegemonic discourses, it is important to hear those voices that have been long silenced and ignored – voices that are not white, not male and even not heterosexual. Fighting against the processes of historical erasure, Brand does a counter-writing of history through which she manages to give voice to silenced ignored accounts of the past and she ‘offers a set of historically based alternatives’⁶⁰ to the dominant historical representations.

Brand rewrites history through diasporic characters – mainly female ones – who cannot escape the memories of their ancestors’ experiences of exile, loss and slavery. In her essay collection *Bread Out of Stone*, she argues that the memory of slavery is ever-present:

‘All Black people here have a memory, whether they know it or not, whether they like it or not, whether they like it or not, whether they remember it or not, and in that memory are such words

⁵⁸ Pamela MC CALLUM, Christian OLBEY, 1999, p. 161.

⁵⁹ Erica JOHNSON, 2004.

⁶⁰ Lynette HUNTER, 1992, p. 260.

as land, sea, whip, work, rape, coffle, sing, sweat, release, days... without... this... pain... coming... We know... have a sense... hold a look in our eyes... about it... have to fight every day for our humanity... redeem it every day' (BOOS, 22-23).

In her writings, she demonstrates how the colonial past and the horrors of slavery haunt and continue to shape the present marking black diasporas' lives with the consequences of other times. Whether her characters are described as slaves or as the descendants of slaves, Brand implies that they cannot escape their haunting condition. Although Brand shows that one can never completely transcend the hauntings of history, she explicitly tries to exorcize the burden of the past and demonstrate that even if the past cannot be redeemed, the present can still be worked upon to make the future anew. As Himani Bannerji points out, both in her poetry and in her prose Brand does an incredible attempt at catching up with the past which is aimed at sensing out the present 'mainly in order to seize the future'.⁶¹

Brand tries to achieve the kind of freedom and relief that derives from the detachment from history and seeks to discover 'how to be human, how to live without historical pain' (A MAP, 157). She often expresses her longing and 'desire for relief from the persistent trope of colonialism. To be without this story of captivity, to dis-remember it, or to have this story forget me, would be heavenly' (A MAP, 42).

Although her will is to 'feel as if history was not destiny' (A MAP, 168), she admits that it is not possible to "unhappen" history and argues that: 'Black experience in any modern city or town in the Americas is a haunting. One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history proceeds. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives. Where one stands in a society seems already related

⁶¹ Himani BANNERJI, 1986, p. 47.

to this historical experience. Where one can be observed is relative to that history' (A
MAP, 25).

Chapter 3: Place

If you are intimate with a place, a place with whose history you are familiar, and you establish an ethical conversation with it, the implication that follows is this: the place knows you are there. You will not be forgotten, cut off, abandoned. How can a person obtain this? [...] The key, I think, is to become vulnerable to a place. If you open yourself up, you can build intimacy. Out of this intimacy may come a sense of belonging.⁶²

For Africans in the Caribbean and the Americas, who in the words of the spiritual, have been trying to sing their songs in a strange land, be/longing is problematic. Be/longing anywhere – the Caribbean, Canada, the United States, even Africa... how could they – we – begin to love the land, which is the first step in belonging, when even the land was unfree?⁶³

Home is the first place you look for even if you are running from it (BOOS, 27)

Diaspora marks the end of any easy relationship to homeland, signals the loss of intelligible ancestral origins and undermines the idea of belonging. As a consequence of Diaspora's dispersal across multiple lands and familiar separations, diasporic people live in a paradoxical and fragmentary condition as they do not belong to any place and belong to every place at the same time, and are physically and psychically homeless, both away from home and at home.

Shaped by their history of displacement and exile, contemporary diasporic writers centre their writing on the issues of place and identity and set the search for the location where one feels "at home" as one of their main projects. As scholars Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out,⁶⁴ since the sense of self and the connection between identity and place have been eroded by the experience of Diaspora and dislocation, for diasporic subjects the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place is fundamental.

In their works, postcolonial writers represent the difficulties and efforts of formerly colonized individuals to try and build a life in a new country while

⁶² Barry LOPEZ, 'A literature of place', in *Portland's magazine*, University of Portland, 1997.

⁶³ Marlene N. PHILIP, *Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture*, Stratford, Ontario: Mercury Press, 1996, p. 22.

⁶⁴ Bill ASHCROFT, Gareth GRIFFITHS, Helen TIFFIN, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*, London: Routledge, 1989.

simultaneously confronting with the memory of their past represented by their country of origin. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue (1989), the process of reconciliation of old and new experiences is complicated since diasporic subjects do not only have to face a geographical displacement, but also a linguistic and a cultural one leading to feelings of alienation and desperate attempts of constructing place.

As professor of Afro-American studies Kevin Quashie points out, “home is the unforgiving and unbearable metaphor that nonetheless is perhaps the cleanest motivation for an artist: to find a place for herself, a place to belong, which is also finding herself.”⁶⁵ In her body of work, Brand investigates the concept of “home” and offers a nuanced view of it by depicting the experiences of diasporic individuals who strive to find spaces with which they can identify and try to overcome the feelings of alienation and displacement in their new countries of settlement.

Instead of trying to avoid or ignore the doubleness of her experience as an Afro-Caribbean Canadian citizen, Brand explores her condition and uses it in her writings to negotiate and create new social and literary spaces. As Rinaldo Walcott points out, Brand deploys her immigrant/citizen status to redraw the Canadian urban landscape as well as the boundaries of knowledge, experience and belonging ‘in order to announce and articulate a black presence that signals defiance, survival and renewal.’⁶⁶

3.1 Home, belonging and the politics of drifting

For members of diasporic communities, the notion of “home” is entangled with the idea of the homeland and with nostalgic desires and longings of return, even among second generation diasporic subjects who have never actually lived there. In fact, even

⁶⁵ Kevin E. QUASHIE, *Black women, identity, and cultural theory: (un)becoming the subject*, Piscataway, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004, p. 163.

⁶⁶ Rinaldo WALCOTT, ‘A Tough Geography: Towards a Poetics of Black Space(s) in Canada.’ In *Unhomely States: Theorizing English Canadian Postcolonialism*, ed. by C. SUGARS, Peterborough: Broadview, 2004, p. 279.

if homeland exists only in memory, recollections or histories, the idea of return and the sense of connection to one's place of origin are so critical and penetrating that they extend themselves beyond those who personally lived in and remember the mother country. It is a sort of intergenerational legacy as the new generations basically inherit some of their predecessors' pasts and longings.

Although members of diasporic groups fantasize about their homelands, they have little illusion about the possibility of returning, as they know that 'in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional'⁶⁷ and that the map to go back to their place of origin might be irrevocably lost since after the Diaspora the route back home is 'only a set of impossibilities' (A MAP, 224). For example, at the end of the novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, in a psalm-like-tale Kamena tells Bola that the fellow slaves of Marie Ursule "bless the poison your mother [Marie Ursule] had gather to send them all home" (ATF, 296) almost stressing that for diasporic subjects no return to home is possible if not through death.

Brand challenges the myth of home and underlines that for members of the Black Diaspora it is impossible to return to their homeland as 'there are no maps. [...] Since leaving was never voluntary, return was, and still may be, an intention, however deeply buried. There is [...] no return' (A MAP, 1). In an interview with Maya Mavjee published in *Read Magazine*, Brand also explains that 'the journey to Africa is not a temporal journey to a physical homeland but a journey to a spiritual one which has elements of a past that was broken and tragic'.⁶⁸ Moreover, in the first section of *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand describes her vain attempt to make her grandfather recall the name of his African tribe and therefore to gain a little knowledge about her

⁶⁷ Edward W. SAID, 'Reflections on Exile'. In *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. by R. FERGUSON, M. GEVER, T.T. MINH-HA, C. WEST, Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, 1990, p. 365.

⁶⁸ Maya MAVJEE, 'Opening the Door: An Interview with Dionne BRAND BY Maya Mavjee'. In *Read Magazine*, 2.1, 2001, p. 28.

identity and her place of origin. In the following section, she explains the extraordinarily ability of the tiny rufous hummingbird to travel ‘five thousand miles from summer home to winter home and back’ (A MAP, 6). This emblematic juxtaposition seems to point out that human beings can lose their sense of origin and of a place of belonging more than small creatures do.

In the interview with Maya Mavjee, Brand also refers to Africa and to the Door of No Return and admits that as ‘time and history separate us from that place it is therefore a space in the imagination’.⁶⁹ Indeed, diasporic individuals are aware that there might be no homeland to return to because it might not exist anymore or it might not be the safe welcoming place of their imagination. As an example, the protagonist of the final story of Brand’s collection *Sans Souci* manages to return to her island of origin, but her existence there is unexpectedly marked by feelings of alienation and unbelonging and her expectations about the dreamed homeland are completely betrayed.

At any rate, diasporic subjects face difficulties not only in trying to restore and maintain the roots and routes which connected them to their country of origin, but also in establishing a connection with the new adopted country. In her most extensive and explicit counter-cartographic project *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand depicts a vignette that exemplifies how the living condition of diasporic subjects is marked by alienation, displacement and removal. She describes an ordinary scene happening on Granville bus where a Salish woman asks a Black driver for directions and notes that the ‘woman asking directions might have known these names several hundred years ago. Today when she enters the bus she is lost. She looks into the face of another, a man who surely must be lost, too, but who knows the way newly mapped, superimposed on this piece of land. [...] He is not from here. Where he is from is indescribable and equally vanished from his memory or the memory of anyone he may remember’ (A

⁶⁹ Maya MAVJEE, 2001, p. 28.

MAP, 219). Moreover, Brand adds that the black ‘driver knows some paths that are unrecoverable even to himself. He is the driver of lost paths’ (A MAP, 220). This meditation on the condition of estrangement and displacement of diasporic subjects does not only refer to the author herself, the Black bus driver and the Salish woman, but also includes Brand’s readers as they are all affected by ‘the rupture in mind and body, in place, in time. We all feel it’ (A MAP, 221).

In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand comments on the space of in-betweenness where diasporic subjects are to be found. She states that their ‘inheritance in the Diaspora is to live in this inexplicable space. That space is the measure of [their] ancestors’ step through the door towards the ship. One is caught in the few feet in between’ (A MAP, 20). In her body of work, Brand focuses on the challenge of living in such an “inexplicable space” and the difficulty of creating a sense of self and identity on “water without boundaries”.

In a passage of the poetry collection *No Language is Neutral*, Brand illustrates the condition of in-betweenness of diasporic individuals for whom the new cities are only “like home” and the memory of back home is an escapist fantasy:

I walk Bathurst Street until it comes like home
Pearl was near Dupont, upstairs a store one
Christmas where we pretend as if nothing changed we,
make rum punch and sing, with bottle and spoon,
song we we self never even sing but only hear when
we was children. (NLIN, 27)

The condition of being in the Black Diaspora is contradictory and fragmentary as diasporic individuals live in this situation of in-betweenness as they do not belong to

any place and belong to every place at the same time, and are physically and psychically homeless, both away from home and at home. No matter where diasporic individuals move, they are always located out of place.

As Bina Toledo Freiwald argues,⁷⁰ the dynamics of belonging and “being at home” are governed both by the principle of inclusion and by patterns of difference and exclusion. Indeed, home, locality and nation are built on the selective inclusion and exclusive domain of some members and on the exclusion and marginalization of others. In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand discusses the issue of origin and observes that in Canada everyone is implicated in a nation-state whose ‘exclusionary power structures [...] have legitimacy based solely on conquest and acquisition’ (A MAP, 54). Moreover, she adds that origins are continuously being redefined, especially by the immigrants who work to achieve a degree of belonging.

In the same volume, Brand explores the slippery foundation of the sense of belonging for diasporic subjects like her who have not only to confront with an enormous gap in historical knowledge and an intense desire to find and restore their place of origin, but also to deal with a reality of exclusion and unbelonging. The problem with diasporic subjects’ sense of belonging lies indeed in the fact that Black Diaspora is not to be associated with a single origin or a specific homeland to return to, and that a history of multiple displacements has made diasporic individuals “homeless”.

The current condition of diaspora subjects is therefore one of rootlessness and routlessness and can be defined in terms of dislocation rather than in terms of belonging. Unlike first-class citizens for whom belonging is something given, for diasporic individuals the feeling of being familiar and in connection with a place and its inhabitants is often an unaccomplished longing. As diasporic subjects long for a place where they can feel at home and feel part of a community, they often question

⁷⁰ Bina Toledo FREIWALD, 2000, p. 38.

themselves about their origins and routes, they undergo a process of self-definition and strive to find their position in predominantly white contexts. As an example, in the novel *In Another Place, Not here*, the woman who takes care of Elizete during her childhood emphasizes her condition marked by exclusion and unbelonging by insisting to repeat ‘I don’t belong here’(IAPNH, 36).

In a section of the same novel, Brand questions the limits of belonging in the diasporic context and affirms that diasporic individuals “were past it [belonging]. It was not wide enough, not gap enough, not distance enough. Not rip enough, belonging. Belonging was too small” (IAPNH, 42). And later adds that “they were not interested in belonging. It could not suffice. Not now. It could not stanch the gushing ocean, it could not bandage the streaming land” (IAPNH, 43). Indeed, having gone through a brutal history of displacement, diasporic individuals react by choosing to reject belonging and place itself, and by inhabiting the only space suitable for holding their grief: ‘they owned the sublime territory of rage’ (IAPNH, 43).

One of Brand’s central topics, belonging is treated in many different ways: as a personal dilemma, as a collective problem for members of the Black Diaspora, as a general widespread issue affecting all marginalized diasporic individuals in contemporary societies. In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand suggests that a ‘desire for belonging, expressed through the notion of home, is a form of nostalgia that feminist of colour need to reject’⁷¹ and affirms: “belonging does not interest me. I had once thought that it did. Until I examined that underpinnings. One is misled when one looks at the sails and majesty of tall ships instead of their cargo” (A MAP, 85).

Later in the same book, she also adds that ‘our ancestors were bewildered because they had a sense of origins – some country, some village, some family where

⁷¹ Kit DOBSON, ““Struggle Work”: Global and Urban Citizenship in Dionne Brand’s “What We All Long For”. In *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Vol. 31, n.2, University of New Brunswick, 2006, p. 92.

they belonged and from which they were rent. We, on the other hand, have no such immediate sense of belonging, only drift' (A MAP, 118).

Drawing on Paul Gilroy's work on diasporic movement and community, in her body of work, Brand underscores the inadequacies and the limitations of the nation-state and foregrounds the centrality of the idea of belonging. According to scholar Marlene Goldman, Brand 'offers an alternative to the boundedness of home and the nation-state'⁷² by outlining the concept of drifting as an alternative option and by adopting Gilroy's image of the ship as a metaphor for the enduring impact of the Black Diaspora. In her essay, Goldman presents drifting as a practice against 'both the model of the Euro-American modernist exile, whose desires for belonging are typically nostalgic and directed toward a lost origin – and the model of the immigrant – whose desires are reoriented toward a new home and a new national community'.⁷³ As Kit Dobson points out, 'instead of pledging allegiance to the nation state or longing for a lost home, drifting between or beyond such positions offers a possibility for creating a new and liberating politics'.⁷⁴

Being part of a project of resistance and decolonization, drifting embodies both a political stance and a way of living as it represents Brand's desire to find a space transcending both homesickness and the frustrated longing for belonging, as well as the migrant's attitude and ability to maintain a connection with both here and there. In *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, Maya glimpses the life she dreams of and describes it using repeatedly the term "drift": 'she only wanted to drift down streets or drift out into the country. [...] She wanted to be nowhere on time and she wanted incidents of music in cafés and clubs when she drifted into music as she was music itself. [...] Drift. She liked the word, suggesting streams of her appearing and dissipating in air' (ATF, 215).

⁷² Marlene GOLDMAN, 2004, p. 13.

⁷³ Marlene GOLDMAN, 2004, p. 26.

⁷⁴ Kit DOBSON, 2006, p. 89.

By positioning herself and her diasporic characters in the middle between a lost unrecoverable home and an unattainable desired one, Brand frees herself and her characters from the burden of territorial positioning and goes beyond the traditional notion of belonging. Marlene Goldman observes, ‘the concept of drifting invites the reader to re-theorize home as a constellation of multiple sites – a series of somewheres that cannot be captured under any one place name’.⁷⁵

As Johanna Garvey points out, Brand suggests that ‘one cannot remain landlocked on either side of the Atlantic but must engage with the ocean itself in all its metonymic complexity and contradiction’.⁷⁶ Since for diasporic individuals home can neither be “here” in the place they live, nor “there” in their country of origin, it is only possible for them to locate home in the Atlantic Ocean as it transcends national boundaries and permits creative agency. Drawing on Paul Gilroy’s work, Brand figures the Atlantic ocean as a site of cultural identity, transformation and imagined community for blacks. To choose the ocean – hence water – is to choose flux and movement over stasis and therefore it is an affirmation of liminality and migrancy against stasis and nationality. This is also in line with sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s view of modernity which stresses both the decline of community and the fluidity of modernity to describe new current ways of dwelling and moving through space.

In her writings, Brand addresses relevant issues concerning the experience of mobility and cosmopolitanism in contemporary societies. Moving through space, as well as through time, in an imagined journey from Canada to Africa across the Atlantic ocean, in *A Map to the Door of No Return* she shows the centrality of the notion of movement and dislocation, stresses the impossibility for diasporic individuals of positioning the self in a distinct site of belonging and underlines that the lack of

⁷⁵ Marlene GOLDMAN, 2004, p. 13.

⁷⁶ Johanna GARVEY, 2003, p. 492.

destination is one of the unavoidable consequences of Diaspora leading to an always momentary and deferred location of the self. In this book, Brand is constantly travelling and states that ‘landing is what people in the Diaspora do. Landing at ports, dockings, bridgings, stocks, borders, outposts. [...] I am without destination; that is one of the inherited traits of the Diaspora. I am simply where I am’ (A MAP, 150). In *In Another Place, Not here*, Brand describes Elizete’s arrival in Canada by saying that the Caribbean cane-cutter has ‘landed here. Land up yes. [...] Landed like a fish or a ship’ (IAPNH, 47).

The issues of migrancy and in-betweenness appear increasingly in Brand’s writings as freeing alternatives to the limits and restrictions of the notions of home, belonging and nation-space. Displaying a growing interest in liminality and dislocation, from the end of the 1980s onwards, in her works Brand shows an emphasis on modes and spaces of transition as sites of racial and cultural confluence. She makes little reference to buildings, national monuments or any static fixed structures, which are elements of dominating architecture associated with white cultural and economic dominance, and rather give prominence to travel and means of transport in all their forms – streets, corners, junctions, subways, trains, cars, aeroplanes and boats. As an example, an entire section of the essays collection *Bread Out of Stone* is devoted to Toronto’s Bathurst Subway which is a space of transit that in the 1970s sort of felt like home to many diasporic individuals of African descent as it represented ‘the point from which [they] would meet the city’ (BOOS, 28). Brand refers that immigrants were first taken to Bathurst to be located and therefore the subway ‘was the passageway, the nexus from which [they] all radiated, the portal through which [they] all passed’ (BOOS, 29).

Moreover, in her first collection of fiction *Sans Souci and Other Stories*, she focuses on black female diasporic characters on the move within and between various Canadian cities. In the opening story “Train to Montreal”, the protagonist travel from

Toronto's Union Station to Montreal to join an ex-lover; in "Blossom" the Trinidadian protagonist moves from the white neighbourhood where she worked as a babysitter and cleaning lady to an obeah house in Vaughan Road in a multicultural district where linguistic and racial boundaries are more unstable. Similarly, in the poetry collection *Land to Light On*, the speaker makes reference to her multiple journeys: 'in the middle of afternoons driving North', 'on a highway burrowing north', 'I was driving here and you can't believe this city', 'in the middle of traffic at Church and Gerrard' (LAND, 13,14, 22, 24).

Journeys represent indeed a major element of Brand's main publications in prose and poetry. The subjects of her works are restless diasporic spirits always in movement through lands of loss and longing, always trying to find a place where it would be possible for them to create a home and a community to which they might feel some sense of connection and belonging.

As Brand herself is a migrant struggling to fit in and define herself among strangers, she has not only faced the issue of home and belonging on a professional level, but also on a personal one. In her writings, she incorporates her own experience of displacement and loss while meditating on the possibility of a "country" where she might belong and on her pressing need to go home.

In the essays collection *Bread Out of Stone*, she states:

we're not going any place, and we're not melting or keeping quiet in Bathurst Subway or on Bathurst Street or on any other street we take over – Eglinton, Vaughan, Marlee. If our style bothers you, deal with it. That's just life happening, that's just us making our way home (BOOS, 80-81)

Like for other diasporic subjects, Brand's past of multiple displacements has made her homeless. Being aware that she will never be able to belong to a single place, Brand negotiates her identity between three different poles – Africa, the Caribbean and Canada – and declares:

I am not a refugee
I have my papers
I was born in the Caribbean,
Practically in the sea,
Fifteen degrees above the equator
I have a canadian passport,
I have lived here all my adult life,
I am stateless anyway (CHRON, 70)

In an interview with Pauline Butling she addresses to the condition of homelessness affecting diasporic people and asserts that “home, that whole thing that makes us feel warm and possible or whatever, it's really not something that any of us have experienced. That home is somewhere. If we want we could make it. But it's not something that we've had”.⁷⁷

Pointing out his condition of homelessness, scholar Mike Phillips asserts: “nowadays in the Caribbean I feel wary, alien, an outsider in the region where I was born. [...] In Africa I was a foreigner belonging to nowhere and no one.”⁷⁸ Similarly, Brand is aware of the impossibility of returning to the imagined and longed for Africa, and in her poetry collection *No Language is Neutral* she also realizes that her Caribbean

⁷⁷ Pauline BUTLING, 2004, p. 84.

⁷⁸ Mike PHILLIPS, ‘At Home in England’ in Onyekachi WAMBU, *Empire Windrush, Fifty Years of Writing About Black Britain*, Phoenix, London, 1999.

native island has a beautiful panorama and a warm sea to swim into during her visits, but as a country it is “nowhere” to her:

An ocean you come to
swim in every two years, you, a slave leaping
retina, capture the look of it. it is like saying you are
dead. This place so full of your absence (NLIN, 30)

Having realized that neither the Africa of her ancestors she dreams about, nor her Caribbean mother country represent a suitable home for herself, Brand chooses to stay in Canada and tries to establish a connection with it and to transform it into a possible country for herself, no matter her experience there is problematic as it is marked by racism, marginalization and discrimination.

At any rate, despite her formal citizenship, Brand’s imagined space of belonging, her desired “country”, is not Canada. In her writings Brand expresses her demand for a nation-state responsibility and ethicality that goes beyond the boundaries of a single nation and in her poetry collection *Land to Light On* she declares:

I don’t want no fucking country, here
or there and all the way back, I don’t like it, none of it,
easy as that. I’m giving up on land to light on. (LAND, 48)

Through this emblematic statement Brand expresses the refusal of the “here” of her country of settlement, Canada, of the “there” of her native Caribbean islands and of the “all the way back” of the imagined homeland in Africa, as possible homes for her. Being aware that longing for place and belonging neither can be satisfied in an escapist flight to one’s native homeland, nor it can be satisfied in the assimilation to the

dominant white culture in the country of settlement, in an interview with Maya Mavjee published in *Read Magazine*, Brand clearly states: “I want to live in another kind of world”.⁷⁹

At any rate, Africa, Canada and the Caribbean work as poles in Brand’s search for a home for herself and for her black diasporic lesbian characters. In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand makes clear that there is no place she considers as her home or where she feels she belongs to, but rather there are a great number of places that are deeply significant to her and that contribute to her process of creating some sense of home and belonging. Scholar Teresa Zackodnik comments that Brand moves ‘from a nostalgic desire for homeland to a recognition of homeland in herself and in a synthesis of experiences shared with others, Brand carves from her exile a paradoxical place of belonging’.⁸⁰ As Zackodnik points out, Brand claims to be at home in her mind as she recognizes a homeland in herself that she carries with her all of the time made up by her multiple experiences shared with other people. In an interview, Brand recognizes in fact that: “I think I do live in a different place, I just haven’t fully come to understand it yet.”⁸¹

3.2: Toronto, the city that has never happened before

In her literary production, and especially in her later works, Brand illustrates the possibilities provided by Canada’s largest metropolis, since Toronto is the city that ‘has never happened before because of all these different types of people, sharing different kinds of experiences, or what we call identities, have just not been in the same place together before’.⁸² Brand perceives Toronto as ‘colourising beautifully. In a weird way

⁷⁹ Maya MAVJEE, 2001, p. 28.

⁸⁰ Teresa ZACKODNIK, 1996, p. 208.

⁸¹ Maya MAVJEE, 2001, p. 28.

⁸² Maya MAVJEE, 2001, p. 28-29.

this is a very hopeful city' (BOOS, 35). In an interview with Paulo Da Costa, she states: "When I walk around Toronto, the city I live in primarily, and I see people from all over the world make a living out of it, I think that's fantastic. Fabulous possibilities exist, things haven't been worked out and we see the becoming of it."⁸³

At any rate, at the beginning of Brand's career her view of Toronto was far more negative. In her early works, Brand refuses the traditional idealized vision of the cosmopolitan city as a place where the so called citizens of the cosmos⁸⁴ inhabit and share a space of acceptance and tolerance. Indeed, Toronto is not presented as a site of possibility, but rather as a cosmopolitan space in which diasporic subjects experiment social exclusion, alienation and dislocation.

In a section of her poetry collection *No Language is Neutral*, Brand describes her arrival in Toronto and underlines the feelings of estrangement and unbelonging that she experiences during her stay there. As she finds herself a stranger in a big city with no familiar faces and places to refer to, in her poems she expresses her uneasiness and frustration for a place that denies and silences her presence:

Dumbfounded I walk as if these sidewalks are a
place I'm visiting. Like a holy ghost [...]
here! The work nobody else wants to do...it's a good
work I'm not complaining! But they make it taste bad,
bitter like pease. You can't smile here, is a sin, you
can't play music, it too loud (NLIN, 28)

Besides describing her personal experience of racism and unbelonging, in the same collection, Brand also depicts Toronto as aesthetically and ideologically repellent:

⁸³ Paulo DA COSTA, 2001, p. 2-3.

⁸⁴ Dating back to the 4th century B.C., the term cosmopolitanism was coined by the Greeks to refer to the world, not in the sense of the earth, but rather in the sense of the universe.

It don't have nothing call beauty
here but this is a place, a gasp of water from a
hundred lakes, fierce bright windows screaming with
goods, a constant drizzle of brown brick cutting
dolorous prisons in every green uprising of a bush.
No wilderness self, is shards, shards, shards,
shards of raw glass, a debris of people you pick you way
through returning to your worse self, you the thin
mixture of just come and don't exist (NLIN, 26)

Although in the novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon* the geographical focus is not on the city of Toronto but rather on the world at large as its protagonists are scattered all over Europe, the United States, Canada and even South Asia, Brand finds some space to describe Toronto as a chaotic city in decay. In a long letter addressed to her mother, the black immigrant from Trinidad Eula writes:

'I am living in a city at the end of the world, Mama. It is rubble. It is where everyone has been swept up, all of it; all of us are debris, things that a land cleaning itself spits up. It is the end of the world here. The office buildings and the factory buildings and houses and shops and garages all wreathed in oil and dust and piled up on top of themselves. It is as if some pustule erupted from the ground and it is this city. It is bloated and dry at the same time, crumbling with newness, rubbled in glitter.[...] The streets here are full of decay. [...] They are all decaying on the streets and the streets themselves seem old and crumbling, the concrete is chipped and old garbage decay in gutters' (ATF, 238, 240)

Another overwhelming description of Toronto as a site devastated by indifference and abandonment is also to be found in the long narrative poem *Thirsty*, where the poetic voice bluntly denounces that:

All the hope gone hard. That is a city.
The blind houses, the cramped dirt, the broken
air, the sweet ugliness, the blissful and tortured
flowers, the misguided clothing, the bricked lies
the steel lies, all the lies seeping from flesh
falling in rain and snow, the weeping buses,
the plastic throats, the perfumed garbage, the
needled sky, the smogged oxygen, the deathly clerical
gentlemen cleaning their fingernails at the stock
exchange, the dingy hearts in the newsrooms, that is
a city, the feral amnesia of us all (THIRSTY, 24)

In this collection, the cosmopolitan nameless city – described as a sterile place of multiple “thresholds”, “doorways” and “corners” (THIRSTY, 1) – has a terrible impact on human beings as it is indifferent to their suffering and it has the power to weaken and to dehumanize them. Although in this collection Toronto is often depicted with negative imagery such as the “caustic piss of streets”, the “damaged horizon” or its “stink [which] is fragrant offal, sometimes it is putrid”, (THIRSTY, 5, 62) in poem XXII a lyrical affirmation of the beauty of the city is to be found:

I did hear the city’s susurrus,
loud, wide, promising, like wine, obscurity and rapture,
the bright veiled Somali women hyphenating Scarlett Road,

the eternal windows, Azorean and Italian at Igreja de Santa
Inez de San Antonio. At the sea King Fish Market,
the Portuguese men have learned another language. “Yes
sweetie, yes dahling, and for you only this good good price.”
This to the old Jamaican woman who asks, “Did you cut the fish
like I told you? Why you charging me so much?” This dancing,
these presences, not the least, writing the biographies
of streets, I took, why not, yes, as wonderful (THIRSTY, 40)

In this passage the vibrant sights and sounds of people in Toronto’s downtown
colourful markets and streets show the vitality of Toronto as a multicultural and
multilingual city “in the middle of becoming”. Downtown Toronto is an area of
interaction, contact and transition where some positive aspects of coexistence emerge:
the acceptance of difference – exemplified by the bright veiled Somali woman – and the
exercise of civility – exemplified by the joyful interaction between the Jamaican woman
and the Portuguese fishmongers.

Presented as an extraordinary city with an unprecedented mixture of
construction and deconstruction, chaos and vitality, Toronto is indeed seen as a site
where relocations and interactions take place and generate freedom, newness and
human connections:

No voyage is seamless. Nothing in a city is discrete
A city is all interpolation. The Filipina nurse bathes a body, the
Vincentian courier delivers a message, the Sikh driver navigates a
corner. What happens? A new road is cut, a sound escapes, a touch lasts (THIRSTY, 37)

A space of fusion and contradictions, Toronto is for Brand both the site of a widespread moribund white monoculture and the site of the vibrant chaotic multicultural she celebrates in her works. It is indeed in this combination of decay and vitality that Brand envisions the promise of something beautiful:

Just me and the city
That's never happened before, and happened
Though not even like this, the garbage
Of pizza boxes, dead couches,
The strip mall of ambitious immigrants
Under carcasses of cars, oil-soaked
Clothing, hulks of rusted trucks, scraggily
Gardens of beans, inshallahs under the breath,
Querido, blood fire, striving stilettoed rudbeckia (THIRSTY, 11)

The city, which is at the same time new and worn out, effortlessly features a variety of heterogeneous hybrid elements such as Italian pizzas, Islamic prayers and North-American jargon. Both visually and literally, this list of discarded objects and immigrant tongues allows the reader to imagine Toronto as a multicultural and multilingual place of convergence and interaction. Indeed, according to one of the second-generation Canadians of Brand's most recent novel *What We All Long For*, 'this [is] the beauty of the city, its polyphonic murmuring'. (WWALF, 149) Moreover, in the short story "At the Lisbon Plate" in Brand's collection of fiction *Sans Souci and Other Stories*, there is another clear example of multiculturalism and hybridization. The protagonist of the story finds around the Portuguese bar a place that is hybrid and hybridizing since it is run by a woman who has 'possibly lived in Angola or

Mozambique' (SS, 96) and it is not located in a Portuguese colony, but rather in Kensington Avenue in Toronto.

The multicultural aspect of Toronto is evident also in a section of her meditation book *A Map to the Door of No Return* where Brand states:

In a city there are ghosts of old cities. There are lies and re-creations. Everyone thinks that a city is full of hope, but it isn't. Sometimes it is the end of imagination. [...] Ghosts try to step into life. Selam Restaurant, Jeonghysa BUDDISH Temple, Oneda's Market, West Indian and Latin American Foods, Afro Sound, Lalibela Ethiopian Restaurant, Longo's Vegetable and Fruits, Astoria Athens Restaurant, Coffee Time, Star Falafel, Vince Gasparos Meats, Eagle Travel, Taygetos Cafè and Greek Social Club, Pathfinder Bookstore, African Wings Travel, DEC Bookroom and Centre for Social Justice, PCI House-Internet Café, Khosla Travel, Greek Credit Union, Menalon, Asmaria Restaurant and Bar, Turkish Restaurant, Café Jose, African Paradise, Sawa, Manolito Bar Cafè, Wing PO Variety, El Jaroletto Restaurant, Ramon Humeres – Dentist, Universal Beauty supply (A MAP, 110-111)

The various elements of the streetscape presented in this catalogue imply a localized identity from elsewhere and testify the way in which diasporic individuals strive to express their identity and distinctiveness and to establish themselves culturally and economically in a new place. As Brand explains, in order to achieve a "degree of belonging", immigrants imprint the Canadian streetscape with elements of their countries and cultures.

According to Brand, as in Toronto identities may be rebuilt, the city has the potential to incorporate the new migrants. Toronto is indeed a 'place where old migrants transmogrify into citizens with disappeared origins who look at new migrants as if at strangers, forgetting their own flights. And the new migrants remain immigrants until they too can disappear their origins' (A MAP, 63).

At any rate, in her novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, the author focuses on the dynamics of exclusion, silencing and unbelonging affecting the lives of diasporic individuals settled in Toronto. The city is depicted as a city divided by racial, gender and socio-economic disparities, where there is no room for diversity and difference. As a result, immigrants in Toronto are not able to fit in and become part of the community, but are rather marginalized and discriminated against.

Brand also suggests that in Toronto there's a highly hierarchal space alienating black individuals – especially black women – and relegating them to an inferior social class. The black lesbian protagonists of the novel are well aware of the sexism and racism that exclude them from the white-male dominated Canadian society and are desirous of achieving the condition of belonging in a community that exists only in their dreams and imaginations.

As for Elizete, she has to confront with the harshness of the city and experiments the hostility of an unfamiliar place of radical unbelonging that seems to reject her knowing of it. She wanders through the city without a destination, without a map, without anything she feels familiar or she can simply recognize and admits that 'all of here was just something brushing across her brow' (IAPNH, 50).

Verlia perceives the city's ability to free herself from the deadening hand of her past and admits that 'when she first came face to face with that concrete high-rise, when she fell in love with its distance and grit she was not mistaken. No ties, nothing hanging around your feet.' (IAPNH, 182) Although Verlia initially figures Toronto as a place in which she can try to be active and assert power, she later realizes that the city is not the fruitful ground for her work she believed it to be and rather perceives it as a place that negates her presence and her right to citizenship.

At any rate, for her, Toronto does not only show a reality of exclusion, but also a semblance of belonging:

There are two worlds in this city. [...] One so opaque that she ignores it as much as she can – this one is white and runs things; it is as glassy as its downtown buildings and as secretive; its conversations are not understandable, its motions something to keep an eye on, something to look for threat in. The other world growing steadily at its borders is the one she knows and lives in. If you live here you can never say that you know the other world, the white world, with certainty. It is always changing on you though it stays the same, immovable. [...] The warp is what the new world grows on. The new world growing steadily on the edge of the other. Her streets of barber shops and hairdressers and record stores and West Indian food shops bend and chafe to this swing. They pop up and shut down against this wind. A basement is a dance hall, a bookshop and a place for buying barrels (IAPNH, 180)

The stasis and inscrutability of white Canada represented by the opaque glassy areas of Toronto's business district is opposed to the vitality and creativity of the multicultural Canada inhabiting the city's streets and basements. This passage makes clear that the greater dynamism, flexibility and possibility exist between and below the highrises, in all the interstices and liminal spaces where diasporic subjects live, work, eat and dance.

In this novel, Brand also shows that the shifting streetscapes of Toronto underline the fluid and hybrid nature of a city in a state of becoming. While walking around Toronto Elizete notices indeed that 'old houses turned into an office. The street pushed open diagonally from St Claire Avenue. Vaughn Road. At the bottom was a church and a Jamaican restaurant; an ice-cream parlour and a spiritual store took the bend' (IAPNH, 99).

In *In Another Place, Not Here* Brand gives some hints about her project of creating a counter-cartography of Toronto. In the novel, for example, there is mention of Avenue Road, Gladstone Road, Yonge Road, King Street, Palmerstone Avenue, Vaughan Road, Chinatown, Yorkdale and other important well-known city markers. By indicating detailed streets and places names together with landmarks which are not to be found on maps but are significant for diasporic communities, Brand presents a sort of textual cartography of the city and allows for the creation of an alternative map of Toronto.

This cartographic project is closely related to Brand's concern with naming and re-naming places as a way of inserting elements of Black culture and identity into a white Canadian space. In *In Another Place, Not Here*, Brand makes reference to the renaming of a site on Yonge Street in honour to the African-American slave Joseph Henson and the African-American leader Marcus Garvey: 'Look at us laughing into the park. Henson-Garvey park, we named it, right here in Toronto. Look at us laughing into this new name and into our new selves' (IAPNH, 158). Similarly, in order to mark the distinctiveness and hybridity of the Canadian context, she deploys the Creole language and speech to refer to geographical and urban elements of Toronto. In the poetry collection *No Language is Neutral* for example, she reports that she calls 'Spadina *Spadeena* / until [she] listen[s] good for what white people call it' (NLIN, 26).

While in *In Another Place, Not Here* Brand focuses on the migratory movement of diasporic individuals in transit from one's homeland to a foreign country, in *What We All Long For* she focuses on the potential of Toronto as a complex city of hybridization and intercultural mixing and explores diasporic subjects' displacement inside it.

Portrayed in all its multiracial colour and polyphonic sound, in this novel Toronto plays such a crucial role that Brand handles it more as a real character rather than a mere background and places its detailed description at the very beginning of the

book. From the start, Brand acknowledges the illusory characteristics of Toronto as a ‘city that hovers above the forty-third parallel’ (WWALF, 1) and also points out how the city acts upon its inhabitants. As an example, the snowy winter period, depicted by Brand as a time of isolation and gloominess, reflects the people’s feelings and their sudden ‘eager[ness] for human touch’(WWALF, 2).

Moreover, Brand writes that after the snow melts away and shows all the ugliness that was hidden by it, the city itself smells of ‘eagerness and embarrassment and, most of all, longing’. (WWALF, 1) Once again, the arrival of spring in the city has the power to affect people’s perception of the world and raises new hopes:

The fate of everyone is open again. New lives can be started, or at least spring is the occasion to make it seem possible. No matter how dreary yesterday was, all the complications and problems that bore down then, now seem carried away by melting streets. At least the clearing skies and the new breath of air from the lake, both, seduce people into thinking that. (WWALF, 2).

Although Brand makes clear that this hope is illusory as things will continue in the same way as they were before the snow melt, she is very optimistic about the possibilities offered by the “city that’s never happened before” where ‘all these different types of people, sharing different kinds of experiences, or what we call identities, have just not been in the same place together before’.⁸⁵

In *What We All Long For*, Brand depicts Toronto as a global city in which diverse ethnic groups and cultures meet and clash. She points out at the heterogeneity of Toronto and states that ‘there are Italian neighbourhoods and Vietnamese neighbourhoods in this city; there are Chinese ones and Ukrainian ones and Pakistani ones and Korean ones and African ones. Name a region on the planet and there’s

⁸⁵ Maya MAVJEE, 2001, p. 28-29.

someone from there, here' (WWALF, 4). Moreover, Brand expresses the variety of people inhabiting the city by adding:

In this city there are Bulgarian mechanics, there are Eritrean accountants, Colombian café owners, Latvian book publishers, Welsh roofers, Afghani dancers, Iranian mathematicians, Tamil cooks in Thai restaurants, Calabrese boys with Jamaican accents, Fushen deejays, Filipina-Saudi beauticians, Russian doctors changing tires, there are Romanian bill collectors, Cape Croker fishmongers, Japanese grocery clerks, French gas meter readers, German bankers, Haitian and Bengali taxi drivers with Irish dispatchers (WWALF, 5)

Focusing on the existences of diasporic individuals in a global context, the narrative of *What We All Long For* is centred on the lives of the Canadian born second-generation individuals whose parents took part in the transnational migration. First generation migrants and the new generation have very different attitudes towards the cosmopolitan city. For the first generation immigrants the city is an unwelcoming place, a site of unbelonging and marginalization where the ethnic difference becomes insurmountable and isolating. In Toronto they find it impossible to be their true selves and end up inexorably being 'defined by the city' (WWALF, p.66) As an example, Tuyen's parents end up losing their own sense of identity and accepting 'to see themselves the way the city saw them: Vietnamese food' (WWALF, 67). Moreover they live in a state of in-betweenness divided between the nostalgia for their lost country of origin and the frustration of not being accepted in their new place.

On the contrary, for the second generation characters Toronto is a space for political action, for articulating their identities and creating a sense of self. For them the city assumes a maternal role for it is as if 'a new blood had entered their veins; as if their umbilical cords were also attached to this mothering city' (WWALF, 212).

Experiencing the urban space and the multicultural context, members of the second generation group recognize that the city offers them a sense of belonging they don't feel in their parents' houses and that it allows them to construct an alternative home for themselves. They populate downtown Toronto and all marginal and liminal urban spaces that are filled with the potential for self-definition and belonging.

In this novel, Brand depicts indeed Toronto's desolate suburbs – Etobicoke and Richmond Hill in particular – as dreary places where immigrants live their lives in 'sovereign houses and apartments and rooms' (WWALF, 55), but she also describes the streets, crossroads and subways leading to them as vivid spaces of flux and transformation.

In *What We All Long For*, Brand also highlights that the city itself is in a state of becoming. As Sara Fruner observes, 'the cityscape undergoes incessant changes, with condos popping up, shops closing down, old cool nightclubs replaced by mass chain stores'.⁸⁶ In Toronto indeed, 'one moment a corner is a certain corner, gorgeous with your desires, then it disappears under the constant construction of this and that. A bank flounders into a pizza shop, then into an abandoned building with boarding and graffiti, then after weeks of you passing it by, not noticing the infinitesimal changes, it springs to life as an exclusive condo' (WWALF, 183). Furthermore, Brand points out again to the fluxic and open nature of the cityscape of Toronto when describing 'the Lebanese shawarma place, which had been a doughnut shop, and had once been an ice cream store, and would in another incarnation be a sushi bar, now exhaled odours of roasted lamb' (WWALF, 212-213).

As in *In Another Place, Not Here*, in this novel Canadian urban landscape has been radically re-mapped in order to bring into view areas, neighbourhoods and

⁸⁶ Sara FRUNER, 'Dig Her Text Deep to Draw My text Out! Translating-Exploring Dionne Brand's Land'. In *New Dawn*, Vol. 2, N. 1, 2007, p. 3-14.

buildings that are important for members of diasporic communities, such as Bathurst Subway, Richmond Hill, Alexandra Park, Mimico Youth Detention prison, and so on. The identification of those landmarks, whose presence and significance are usually not registered on maps, is an important element of Brand's counter-cartography of Toronto.

Moreover, in *What We All Long For*, Brand starts sensing Toronto as a possible home for diasporic individuals. This is also represented by the extensive presence of fluid spaces of transition, passage and intersection – streets, highways, subways, crossroads, parking lots -, means of transportation – streetcars, buses, bicycles, cars – and other sites of traffic and interaction. As an example, in the first chapter the main characters are described as riding the Bloor-Danforth subway as it ‘rumbles across the bridge over the Humble River’ (WWALF, 2). Those “in-between places” are fluid nomadic spaces through which diasporic subjects move and resist the strict impositions of nation space.

The city of Toronto is also depicted as a space of exclusion and of inequality where the foreigner, the other is isolated and discriminated against. Through the figure of Quy – Tuyen's supposedly missing brother that is beaten and ‘left half-dead by the road’ (WWALF, 318) by Carla's brother Jamal and a friend of him – Brand shows how the foreigner, the other does not receive welcome and hospitality, but rather is rejected, destroyed and excluded from the complex network of belongings in/to the city. It is as if ‘Quy, in his foreignness and otherness, evoked the abject that the others cannot accept and that reminds them of their own alterity and rejection from society’.⁸⁷

As it is still the site of episodes of racial discrimination and violence, Toronto is not glorified in the novel, but Brand presents it as more accepting and open to diversity than in her previous depictions. Toronto is no longer seen as segregating and isolating,

⁸⁷ Sandra R. GOULART ALMEIDA, ‘Unsettling Voices: Dionne's Brand Cosmopolitan Cities’, In *Crosstalk: Canadian and Global Imaginaries in Dialogue*, ed. by D. BRYDON, M. DVORÁK, Waterloo: Wilfried Laurier University Press, 2010, p. 15.

but rather as a site of opportunity not just for business or relationships, but also for self-discovery. Tuyen indeed is aware that ‘no matter who you are, no matter how certain you are of it, you can’t help but feel the thrill of being someone else’ (WWALF, 154) and of exploring the possibilities of identities.

The present-day metropolitan city as a space where people collide, meet and clash into one another figures as an important reference in Dionne Brand’s writings. In her body of work, Brand gazes at the ugliness, the pollution, the racial discrimination, the injustice, the violence, the economic and sexual exploitation that are still widespread in Toronto, while also celebrating the existence of forms of cooperation, civility, acceptance of difference, gentleness, compassion and beauty. At any rate, her works are not about a particular Canadian city, but Toronto refers more generally to any late modern metropolitan city in which multicultural life is troubled by diasporic haunting and feelings of loss and longing.

As over the years Brand’s view on the possibilities of Toronto has undergone a process of transformation, her body of work can be adopted to follow the trajectory of her shifting vision.

In Brand’s first productions, Toronto is represented as wholly unattractive since her descriptions focus on the worst traits of the city and of its inhabitants. Toronto is indeed depicted as a site of racism, classism and sexism, as a location of loathing and as an alienating place denying belonging to many people. In her later productions, Brand demonstrates that the city produces very different effects: it can cause feelings of estrangement, unbelonging and alienation, as well as it can enhance an enabling sense of possibility and liberation. In her most recent writings, Brand develops a slightly more positive – though still critical – attitude towards Toronto and shows a realistic but often celebratory treatment of it as the “city that’s never happened before” – a site of possibility in which new selves and forms of belonging are possible.

Nevertheless, Brand is far from believing in the possibility of the cosmopolitan city as a hospitable place saturated in tolerance and as a reality capable of dismantling oppressive structures, and rather represents the conflictive nature of the contemporary world. She does not assume a victimized position, but rather seems to suggest that the present reality must be worked upon to fix what is problematic and to make things better for the future. Brand indeed advocates the possibility of agency as the ‘utopic desire provides the energy for imagining change despite the many barriers forbidding its realization’.⁸⁸

3.3: The issues of home and belonging in Brand’s novels

The title of Brand’s first novel *In Another Place, Not Here* is emblematic as it stresses diasporic individuals’ refusal for the tragic and doomed place they live in and their longing and yearning for a different space where freedom, belonging and transformation are possible.

In this novel, Adela – the slave ancestress of Elizete’s foster mother – adopts the most radical attitude as she resists place and her role in it by refusing to form memories, to map her new “home” and by deliberately ‘forgetting the road, the cut in the mountain valley’ (IAPNH, 21) and other distinctive geographical elements of the Caribbean island she was forcibly brought to. With reference to Adela’s attempt at resisting place through wilful erasure and forgetting, Brand writes:

And when she done calculate the heart of this place, that it could not yield to her grief, she decide that this place was nowhere and is so she called it. Nowhere. So she say nothing here have no name. [...] Adela call this place nowhere and with that none of the things she look at she take not of or remember or pass on (IAPNH, 18-19)

⁸⁸ Diana BRYDON, 2006, p. 9.

Adela attempts instead to maintain a connection to her homeland in Africa and her ancestral past, but the traumatic experience of Diaspora and slavery systematically erase her memory of home and as a result ‘all her maps fade from her head, washing off from zinnia to pale ink, the paper of ways, that she stitch and stick with saliva and breath, rinse as the sky in June come watery [...], all that done vanishing. She could not hold on to the turquoise sea what brings she here. Everything pour out of she eyes in a dry, dry river. Everything turn to lime and sharp bones, and she didn’t catch sheself until it was she true name slipping away’ (IAPHN, 22).

No matter how hard Adela tries to memorize and recall the route back to her place of origin, she fails to do so as the maps to her homeland gradually and unrelentingly disappear from her head. The dream of retracing the route of exile back to the Door of No Return and finally reaching the ‘place so old there’s no memory of it’ (IAPNH, 246) is indeed an impossible dream. As the mother country is irrevocably lost, the “here” in the Caribbean island is all that is left and her decision to repudiate and consider it as “Nowhere” cuts her out from any place, any community, and life itself.

Aware of the impossibility of returning to an imagined and longed for mother country, Elizete realizes that the members of her diasporic community settled in her Caribbean island are ‘unable to leave since leaving would suggest a destination and where they had to go was too far and without trace and without maps [...] and they were trapped’ (IAPNH, 44) and paralyzed. Elizete herself feels trapped but, when she watches sweaty Verlia cutting cane close to her in the scorching sun, she seems to glimpse the sweet promise of a graced elsewhere and senses even more the harshness of her abject existence in the Caribbean island. Elizete explains: ‘I come here with Isaiah. He show me the room and he show me the washtub and he show me the fire and he show me the road’ (IAPNH, 8). A widespread condition in patriarchal societies, the

“homelessness” of the domestic sphere is experimented by Elizete as her house does not represent a place of solace and refuge, but rather a place of working duties and domestic violence and abuses. Moreover, a spatial representation of a history of slavery and forced labour in the colonial past, the sugarcane plantation where Elizete works during the day represents a site that continues to be the location of physical and psychological oppression.

Elizete’s “here” in the Caribbean island is dominated by an oppressive system of class and gender relations: in the canefield plantation she daily performs a backbreaking exploitative work, while in the intimacy of her house she is sexually abused every night by her husband who even threatens her not to try to escape him and ‘let him catch [her] at the junction’ (IAPNH, 4). No matter if Elizete acknowledges that she ‘didn’t have no place to go anyway’, (IAPNH, 8) she still perceives the forbidden junction as a promise of escape and her process of imagining new welcoming places of asylum represents indeed her first act of resistance. Indeed, in her moments of need, Elizete imaginatively transports herself to natural places such as the dust tunnels of wood lice she slid through as a child and finds some comfort and solace in those pleasant imagined locations. Moreover, she dreams of escaping to Maracaibo, a city she has never visited but which she envisions as a place full of life and possibilities of transformation and regeneration. Dreaming of getting rid of her brute possessive husband, she figures Maracaibo as ‘a place where a woman can live after she done take the neck of a man’ (IAPNH, 12).

At any rate, it is only with Verlia’s arrival that Elizete’s longings of escaping and imagined elsewhere becomes more possible and more real. She admits that ‘nothing ever happen to me until Verl come along and when Verl come along I see my chance out’ (IAPNH, 4). It’s through their meeting and love affair that Elizete finally finds the courage and strenght to escape economic and sexual slavery.

Brand highlights the interlinking existing between a distant past of flights from slavery and colonial domination and more recent attempts of escape from similar forms of oppression. Elizete's wish to escape from her painful life in the Caribbean and her expectations about migrating to Toronto partly reflect black slaves' longing for freedom and desire for flight from the oppressive South to the free wealthy North. The widespread utopian perception of North America and Europe as countries of economic and social opportunity is indeed a persistent belief. As an example, Canada is seen as a land of possibility holding the promise of freedom from all forms of oppression and exploitation by Verlia's uncle who confidently states: 'Anybody can make it in this country. Is a new country, it have plenty opportunity' (IAPNH, 141).

At any rate, in *In Another Place, Not Here* this notion is subverted and deconstructed by the description of diasporic individuals' experience of racism, rejection and marginalization in Canada. Brand shows that migrants' expectations are seldom not met and describes the harshness of living under constant threat in a foreign land.

Elizete moves to Toronto hoping to reconstitute the past experiences and find some semblance in the city of her lost lover Verlia. She walks the streets of Toronto attempting to gather "glimpses" of Verlia's former life as she realizes that 'this is where Verlia must have lived. She must have walked along this road feeling over ripeness in bananas, buying cane from here' (IAPNH, 100). At any rate the city does not reveal Verlia's past, but rather fails to imprint on Elizete's mind and resists her knowing of it.

As Elizete is not able to 'get her mind recognize this place' (IAPNH, 66), she is not able to locate the city or even locate herself in it and ends up feeling alienated and isolated. In Toronto, she experiments the hostility of a city where 'there were many rooms but no place to live, no place which begins to resemble you' (IAPNH, 63) and where she feels lost because she cannot find anything familiar, anything she is able to

recognize. She lives the familiar fate of the illegal female migrant of colour, finds herself again 'homeless, countryless, landless, nameless' (IAPNH, 48) and claims that Toronto is 'a place she had no feeling for except the feeling of escape' (IAPNH, 70-71).

In Toronto, Elizete is caught in the same oppressive system that dominated her life in the Caribbean: the canefield plantation, Isaiah's house, the road and the junction are simply replaced by 'a room, a station, a clearing, a road' (IAPNH, 52). The dehumanizing exploitative work Elizete performs in different factories in Toronto parallels the harshness of her backbreaking activity as a cane-cutter in Grenada. Moreover, while in the Caribbean she is sexually abused by her husband, in Toronto she is beaten up by a white employer who pushes her 'against the immense white wall, the continent' (IAPNH, 50) and brutally rapes her. Once again, Elizete finds a way of escape through the comforting memory of a familiar place she carries inside her and she perceives as peaceful: 'when he raped her she thought of sand, her face in the sand, the particles flying down her nostrils into her lungs; she thought of the quarry with sand so thick it caked off like brick' (IAPNH, 90). Indeed, the barren landscape of the sand quarry – a place she visited after working in the cane fields in Grenada – aids her to forget the terrible sufferings of her life: "There in the damp, it make me calm, calm, calm and hollow inside me. If I dig enough it cool me and take my mind off the junction" (IAPNH, 11).

Verlia too has great expectations about her new life in Toronto. She admits that 'the city could have been any city' (IAPNH, 159) as long as it provided her with the desired distance from her native homeland and opened up new possibilities for a different life. When Verlia reaches Toronto, she deliberately decides to leave her past behind to start a new life and rather than encoding her surroundings with her memory and experience, she unwaveringly decides to 'never furnish [her] room, a place to sleep

perhaps, a table to eat from but nothing else. She wants it bare, everything bare. No photographs, no sentiment, no memory' (IAPNH, 156).

Nevertheless, her expectations about her new life in a different country are not met and once she arrives in Toronto she 'only [feels] things as someone watching but not living' (IAPNH, 94) and she soon feels as if she had changed 'into something like a sidewalk or a box or a pencil or a bit of paper folded in a pocket, she'd lost a way of making herself exist, she'd become useless' (IAPNH, 95). With reference to Verlia's experience in Toronto, Brand writes:

Here is leaving, here is a highway and a house inhabited by strangers but it's called home, [...] here she memorized the road and here she forgot, she recognizes nothing not even her hands, [...] here is nothing to hold on or to leave a mark, here you...hold on to your name until it becomes too heavy and you forget it (IAPNH, 198-199)

After spending some years in Canada, something goes wrong with Verlia's mind and memory and she has to return to the Caribbean in order to save her sanity. She indeed decides to go back for 'what is essential' (IAPNH, 200), but unfortunately her return does not represent a homecoming as the Caribbean islands are not a real home for her. She admits 'I never got to know this place because I spent so much time running from my family' (IAPNH, 206). Verlia has indeed been dispossessed from place itself and has nowhere to call home. As she listens to local people naming place names on the bus, she recognizes her placelessness:

'All the names of places here are as old as slavery. [...] These small places, somewhere like where I come from. [...] The meanings underneath are meanings I don't know even though I was born somewhere here. [...] You would have to know a place for that and I don't really know anywhere.' (IAPNH, 211)

According to Heather Smyth, in *In Another Place, Not Here*, ‘as a result of the various forms of oppression its characters are subject to, no place is home for Verlia and Elizete, except perhaps the metaphorical home created through political struggle and commitment’.⁸⁹ Elizete says of Verlia that ‘she bet all of she life in this revolution. She had no place else to go, no other countries, no other revolution’. (IAPNH, 114) The character of Verlia illustrates a different mode of relating to the country of settlement as she refuses to immerse herself either in her ethnic minority or in the dominant community, and finds instead a home in a large cultural and political movement. Verlia is indeed well aware that as a black lesbian she will not be able to find a home anywhere and she attempts to create a home for herself through her political commitment in fighting racism and in challenging the dispossession that makes neither Canada nor the Caribbean a suitable home for her.

Verlia expresses her desire ‘to live, exist or be herself in some other place, less confining, less pinned down, less tortuous, less fleshy to tell the truth’ (IAPNH, 127). Being aware that there is no place for Caribbean lesbians, she is left with the only possibility of escape represented by death. Therefore, in order to escape from ‘all the spaces that bound and bind: from history, family, family, place, the body, and ultimately life itself’⁹⁰, Verlia performs an extreme act of escape and leaps off a cliff:

she’s flying out to the sea and in the emerald she sees the sea, its eyes translucent, its back solid going to some place so old there’s no memory of it. She’s leaping. She’s tasting her own tears and she is weightless and deadly. [...] Her body is cool, cool in the air. Her body as fallen away, is just a line, an electric current, the sign of lighting left after lighting, a faultless arc to the deep

⁸⁹ Heather SMYTH, ‘Sexual Citizenship and Caribbean-Canadian Fiction: Dionne Brand’s “In Another Place, Not Here” and Shani Mootoo’s “Cereus Blooms at Night”’. In *A Review of International English Literature*, Vol. 30, N. 2, April 1999, p. 152.

⁹⁰ Bina Toledo FREIWALD, 2000, p. 38.

turquoise deep. She doesn't need air. She's in some other place already, less tortuous, less fleshy (IAPNH, 246-247)

As Bina Toledo Freiwald argues, 'Verlia and Elizete are women without a place of belonging: without a home, without a country. Abena's simple solution to "Go home" will not do'.⁹¹ Indeed, Elizete knows that 'no country will do. Not any now on the face of the earth when she thought about it. Nothing existed that she could live in' (IAPNH, 110). Actually, when she first arrives in Toronto she is warned about the inhospitality of the place by the fellow Caribbean Abena who shouts: 'Go home, this is not a place for us. [...] This is where a man stabs your black woman body eleven times and goes back to work' (IAPNH, 109). Anyway, Elizete is also aware of the impossibility of returning and thinks to herself: 'Go home my ass anyway. She think anything simple like that?' (IAPNH, 233).

Elizete is conscious of having nowhere to call home and fosters the fantasy of a different land – a "back home" to return to or a more general "another place" – far from the misery of the reality of her "here". Unlike Verlia, she decides to attempt to resist and fix her condition of placelessness by naming things and space in order to create places of belonging for herself. Aware of the potentiality of the process of naming, when she finds herself in Toronto, Elizete starts giving names to anything new: 'Today she was Columbus, today the Canadian National was not the Canadian National yet and the Gladstone was not a bar and nothing had a name yet, nothing was discovered' (IAPNH, 47). Empowered by her self-determination, Elizete sees Toronto as a city waiting for her to be discovered and named.

This simple act of naming is a form of resistance as it represents a means of reclaiming the space in a way that it may have the potential to open up new possibilities

⁹¹ Bina Toledo FREIWALD, 2000, p. 52.

of belonging and feeling at home. As scholar Bina Toledo Freiwald points out, Elizete ‘had learned young the lessons taught by the cicadas and the bees – that belonging is made through acts of claiming, by holding the name of a place in one’s voice, by mapping its simple geography of dirt and water’.⁹²

In the novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, Brand recognizes that for minority diasporic groups, “home” – intended as a stable and locatable construction – does not exist. Moreover, through the character of Verlia and her extreme final decision to commit suicide, Brand seems to suggest that any attempt at resisting and trying to find a home is inevitably destined to failure for there is no suitable home for black diasporic subjects. At any rate, through the character of Elizete, Brand also depicts a relation to place that provides diasporic individuals the possibility of survival and resistance. By the act of naming and the resulting appropriation of space, Elizete achieves to make her own personal way of belonging and creating a home for herself. The individual story of Elizete is representative for the collective experience of all the ‘Third World people going to the white man country’ (IAPNH, 60) searching for a utopia that do not exist, but must be struggled for.

In Brand’s next novel, *At the Full and Change of the Moon* published in 1999, the author presents a global view of the Black diasporic existence. Stretching from 1824 until the end of the twentieth century, this novel details the effects of the Middle Passage and slavery on the lives of members of the Black Diaspora. In this book, Brand traces the wandering paths of some of the descendants of the rebel slave Marie Ursule whose lives are unwittingly interconnected and inextricably linked to their progenitor personal terrible experience of forceful exile and slavery.

One of the most emblematic characters of the novel is Kamena, the Maroon struggling to reach the fugitive camp of Terre Bouillante and therefore to find a safe

⁹² Bina Toledo FREIWALD, 2000, p. 49.

home for himself and Marie Ursule's daughter Bola. His search for the Maroon settlement is futile and ineffective since he misleads his own directions, gets lost and ends up circling himself. Just as his ancestors who were taken through the Door of No Return to the New World, Kamena – like any other diasporic individual – is left 'to travel without a map' (A MAP, 224) and cannot help but face the dramatic consequences of the rupture in space caused by the slave trade. As Marlene Goldman points out, Kamena's journey from Mon Chagrin to the Maroon camp in Terre Bouillante echoes the journey of black captives from Africa to the Americas for all the 'images of disorientation, drowning, claustrophobia, loss of control, death, and decomposition [associated to his search] allude to the horrific experience of the Middle Passage'.⁹³

As Sara Fruner points out, Kamena is the archetypal figure of the 'lost wanderer in perpetual search for the home he will never be able to find, a sort of forerunner-forefather of the generations to follow. Samuel, Adrian, Priest, Maya, Eula, on their lives and bodies does Kamena's shadow hover – his rootlessness, his hopelessness too'.⁹⁴ In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand herself observes that 'Kamena's unending and, as history will confirm, inevitably futile search for a homeland is the mirror of the book's later generations – their dispersal, their scatterings to the extreme and remote corners of the world' (A MAP, 202). Scholar Erica Johnson observes that all characters in *At the Full and Change of the Moon* share 'the common experience of exile. That is, the psychic exile experienced by Marie Ursule and Kamena becomes manifest in their descendants through a proliferating narrative of exile.'⁹⁵ Indeed, as Bola decides to 'spread her children around so that all would never be gathered in the same place to come to the same harm' (ATF, 198), her progeny disperses on both sides

⁹³ Marlene GOLDMAN, 2004, p. 16.

⁹⁴ Sara FRUNER, 2007.

⁹⁵ Erica JOHNSON, 2004.

of the Atlantic – inhabiting in different countries such as Canada, the United States, Venezuela, Trinidad, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Belgium – and experiences a physical and geographical dispersal of the family throughout the western world.

No matter their different experiences and locations they are all fugitive, lost, deterritorialized characters who happen to feel ‘marooned like Kamena. Marooned in outposts and suburbs and street corners anywhere in the world’ (A MAP, 211). As an example, Eula, who faces the pain of exile and the isolation of modern life and feels that the members of her family have ‘been scattered out with a violent randomness’ (ATF, 258), admits that she collects ‘maps of all kind, old ones and newer ones, ordinance maps and road maps’ (ATF, 231) because she likes their steadiness and because they offer her comfort and reassurance. When facing a difficult moment or when feeling lost both physically and mentally, Eula indeed searches her way in maps no matter if they depicts far away countries. She states that it doesn’t matter ‘that they were not where [she] was. Their definite lines brought order to [her] head’ (ATF, 231). Although ‘maps are such subjective things, borders move all time’ (ATF, 52), they offer Eula some relief from her condition of alienation and placelessness.

Similarly, Adrian and Maya, who moved to Amsterdam, are depicted as lost broken beings who attempt to overcome their feelings of alienation and unbelonging by trying to find some comfort in the memory of their home, but constantly failing to do so. In her memoirs *A Map to the Door of No Return*, acknowledging the overwhelming sadness of lives lived in exile and isolation, Brand describes her spotting of a young black guy who inspired her creation of the character of Adrian: ‘He was in a kind of despair I have never experienced and experienced then only through his drifting into the street. [...] his drifting into the street, his slight hesitation – this was beauty. I saw that young man drop into the square like a drop of water into an ocean’ (A MAP, 194).

In the novel, the character of Adrian is ‘like Kamena trying to find a destination’ (ATF, 180) since he is not able to locate the city or even to locate himself in it and ends up feeling lost and alienated. Indeed, when he moves around Amsterdam he cannot find anything familiar or anything he is able to recognize and therefore he cannot ‘find his way home to the Biljmer anyway. Fucking maze this Amsterdam, fucking maze, couldn’t tell one building from another, one street from the other’ (ATF, 176). The psychological repercussions of the space of in-betweenness are forcibly conveyed by Adrian, who while wandering through Amsterdam the plight of the descendants of the Black Diaspora:

The blocks from Dam Square to the station were littered with men like him – men from everywhere. [...] Going nowhere like him, trying to figure out the next bit of money, the next laugh, the next fix. A debris of men selling anything, anything they could get their hands on. Dam Square seemed haunted, though it was bustling, haunted by these scores of men changing into other men, who looked the same. Haunted shifts of them from Curacao, Surinam, Africa... (ATF, 180)

In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand comments that her characters are only destined to ‘tear into pieces [...], they can only deliberately misplace directions and misread observations. They can take north for south, west for east. Anywhere they live is remote. They can in the end impugn the whole theory of directions. They inhabit everywhere, mostly the metropolises of North America and Europe. They lives take any direction at any moment’ (A MAP, 203). According to Goldman, ‘all of Brand’s characters are denied, or wilfully refuse, the solace of home and the experience of

belonging, compelled, as they are, to navigate the flux and change instigated by the Middle Passage'.⁹⁶

In *At the Full and Change of the Moon* Brand represents the horror of a history of displacement and exile and shows how its repercussions are transmitted inter-generationally suggesting that 'this transmissibility of destinies and identities, the diasporic legacy of incurable suffering and loss, stemming from the ancestral fore parents Marie Ursule and Kamena, passing through Bola and the multitude of fathers, spreads rhizome like into their progeny, leaving an hereditary taint on them'.⁹⁷ Adrian's disorientation, Maya's drifting existence, Samuel's inconclusiveness; Eula's exilic condition and young Bola's alienation are all unavoidable aftermaths of the history of uprooting and deportation of their progenitors.

As Brand points out, the condition of being of the characters in her novel is marked by a strong unfulfilled longing for home and for a community to which they might feel some sense of belonging. From their immigrant status, Bola's descendants are not able to fit in any form of collectivity, not even in the one of minority, and their continuous movements between places signals their quest for belonging. At any rate, their different histories and locations demonstrate the fluidity and possibility of the diaspora since this terrible shared experience instead of marking a difference among them, rather acts as an element of union. Indeed, the specific places they inhabits may not offer any sense of belonging to those diasporic individuals, but still it is possible for them to count on the unifying network, the abstract community of the Black Diaspora.

It is only with the publication of her most recent novel *What We All Long For* in 2005, that Brand's view on the issues of home and belonging becomes more positive as

⁹⁶ Marlene GOLDMAN, 2004, p. 17.

⁹⁷ Sara FRUNER, 2007.

she starts sensing Toronto as a possible home for diasporic individuals and as a site of belonging both for the older generations of immigrants and for their children.

Portraying the process of resettlement of diasporic families, this novel focuses on how the first and the second generations of migrants attempt to create “home” in a host place and how they negotiate the gaps between their native homelands and the foreign country they live in. Diaspora indeed, is not experienced by the first generation alone, but it’s rather a process that goes beyond spatial and temporal borders as it affects profoundly successive generations too.

In this novel, the main characters are constantly trying to find meaning in their lives by finding or re-creating a home and a community to which they might feel some sense of connection and belonging. They go through a process of remapping places and negotiating subjectivities to create what Diana Brydon defines as “emotional geographies”.⁹⁸ As Brydon points out, rather than being a completed project, this attempt of (re)locating home is a difficult ongoing process that continues over many years – even over a whole lifetime. No matter if it is more a constructed idea of the mind than a real physical entity, creating an idea of home is essential for members of diasporic communities as it helps to find a sense of identity and belonging in foreign territories.

As for the parents of the four main characters, they all originate from different cultures and parts of the world: Tuyen’s family is from Vietnam, Oku’s parents and Carla’s father are from the Caribbean, Carla’s mother has Italian origins, Jackie’s family moved from Nova Scotia. These ‘people born elsewhere’ (WWALF, 20) strive to find a home in the foreign hostile city of Toronto through various agencies. Tuyen’s Vietnamese parents strive to recreate their culture and to preserve the characteristics of their homeland by means of the family restaurant which they also perceive as a place of

⁹⁸ Diana BRYDON, 2006.

refuge. Moreover, Tuyen's father Tuan obsessively draws houses and buildings structures on paper in an attempt to create the perfect "home" he cannot offer to his family in reality. Jackie's parents used to find their own escape at the Paramount club – a place that allowed them to fully express themselves unlike any other place in Toronto – and 'when [it] closed, Jackie's mother and father were lost' (WWALF, 179). As for Carla's parents, while her mother commits suicide because she is sure that she will never find happiness in life, her father tries to create a "home" with a new family, new friends, a new car and a new house. It is through these elements – a restaurant, a club, a new house – that those characters try to re-connect to the home they left behind.

Born and raised in Canada, the four protagonists consider their birthplace as their home and thereby find themselves in contrast with their parents' visions of home. Feeling as 'if they inhabited two countries – their parents and their own' (WWALF, 20), each of them 'left their home in the morning as if making a long journey, untangling themselves from the seaweed of other shores wrapped around their parents. Breaking their doorways, they left the sleepwalk of their mothers and fathers and ran across the unobserved borders of the city, sliding across ice to arrive at their own birthplace' (WWALF, 20). Tuyen and her peers seem to live in an in-between world, divided between the reality of their present-day cosmopolitan world and the allegiance to their parents' homeland.

Unable and unwilling to understand their parents' notion of home, they attempt to find their own home in the country they were born in. As an example, it is through her artworks that Tuyen achieves to make sense of her origins, to express her identity and to create a home she can fit in. Her lubaio – a wooden art installation consisting of wood, photographs, inscriptions, people's post-it notes – does not only represent her own personal experience, but also stands as an emblem of the collective diasporic experience and the city itself. Tuyen also reveals the collective experience of

displacement and borderlessness in one of her art installation named “Traveller”. In this emblematic work of art, she covers ‘herself in bubble wrap, with stickers from various countries pasted on her naked body’ (WWALF, 64) and has the audience ‘lift her and pass her around the room in silence for ten minutes’ (WWALF, 64).

Like their predecessors, the second generation characters attempt to invent home in the city, especially starting from marginal spaces where they feel free to express their art (ghettos, subway halls, alleyways). As an example, by means of their graffiti and drawings, Kumaran and his crew, who live across the alleyway of Carla and Tuyen’s apartment, claim space and attempt to subvert an established order that acts through space to assert its power over the city and its inhabitants.

[The graffiti crew] saw their work – writing tags and signatures – as painting radical images against the dying poetics of the anglicized city – the graffiti crew had filled in the details of the city’s outlines. You could see them at night, very late, when the streets seemed wet with darkness, agile and elegant in their movements. The spiritual presences of Tuyen, Oku and Carla’s generation. Their legs straddling walls and bridge girders and subway caverns, spray painting their emblems of duality, their dangerous dreams (WWALF, 134-135)

The graffiti crew’s works represent a visual embodiment of the otherwise intangible presence of the second generation characters in Toronto. This appropriation of space in downtown Toronto works an act of resistance as it is the means for members of the second generation to claim space and express their rights to the city.

According to Kit Dobson, as members of the younger generation ‘feel little belonging to either the Canadian nation or to their ancestral homes’,⁹⁹ they attempt to carve out a space for themselves in Toronto. Since they are shut out from full participation in the official world, they create their own urban spaces within the

⁹⁹ Kit DOBSON, 2006, p. 88.

interstices of the city and spend their lives in abandoned areas of the city that would be rejected by white people for their danger and dirtiness. As an example, Carla and Tuyen's chaotic apartment, which is a 'place of refuge, not just for their immediate circle, but for all the people they picked up along the way to their twenties' (WWALF, 45), is situated on College Street in a decaying area in downtown Toronto. No matter her parents' pressing requests to return to the family's house in Richmond Hill, Tuyen prefers to live in a filthy apartment full of mice because for her 'everything was better than home' (WWALF, 22). For Tuyen, moving to downtown Toronto does not only represent an escape from her family, but also constitutes a gravitation towards an alternative and more attractive set of urban spaces filled with the potential for belonging and self-definition.

As Emily Johansen argues,¹⁰⁰ all spaces occupied by the characters of *What We All Long For* are marginalized and far from the sites of political and economic power in the city. The Paramount club – known only by 'a select group [of] black people and a few, very few, whites' (WWALF, 95), Jackie's clothing store – located 'just on the border where Toronto's trendy met Toronto's seedy' (WWALF, 99), or Tuyen's parents' Vietnamese restaurant The Saigon Pearl located in Toronto's Chinatown, are examples of the demarcated spatial segregation in Toronto because although their emancipatory potential, these places still fill up a peripheral area.

Furthermore, no matter the Vu's status upgrade and their move from a one bedroom accommodation in downtown Toronto to 'a giant house in Richmond Hill, where rich immigrants live in giant houses' (WWALF, 54), they still live in a suburb exclusively inhabited by immigrants. Brand describes the site in which they settle as 'a sprawling suburb where immigrants go to get away from other immigrants, but of

¹⁰⁰ JOHANSEN Emily, 'Streets are the dwelling place of the collective: public space and cosmopolitan citizenship in Dionne Brand's 'What We All Long For''. In *Canadian Literature/Littérature canadienne: a quarterly of criticism and review*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia, Spring 2008, p. 48-62.

course they end up living with all other immigrants running away from themselves – or at least running away from the self they think is helpless, weak, unsuitable’ (WWALF, 55). Similarly, Oku’s parents are Jamaican immigrants whose life revolves around Toronto’s Little Jamaica, an area placed northeast to the city’s downtown core:

The whole strip of Eglinton between Marleed and Dufferin was full of West Indian stores selling hot food, haircuts, wigs, cosmetics, and clothes. There were stores selling barrels for stuffing goods to send families in the Caribbean and there were stores selling green bananas, yams, pepper sauce, mangos, and salt cod, all tastes from the Caribbean carried across the Atlantic to this strip of the city (WWALF, 190)

At any rate, the characters of *What We All Long For* resist and fight against the colonizing hegemony of the white elite of Toronto through their attempts of emancipatory movement through different areas of the city. Brand shows indeed that although the city is still a stratified and racialized environment, its spatial order is slowly breaking down. As an example, indifferent to the other inhabitants of the city, Carla races on her bicycle through the centres of economic and cultural power in a way that allows her to make sense of the city and of her position in it, and Jackie begins her business of the clothing store in a liminal space hoping that ‘the trendy section would slowly creep toward Ab und Zu and sweep the store into money’ (WWALF, 99). The protagonists of the novel are indeed claiming their own space in the world through their familiarity with the streets of Toronto, their acts of resistance and their appropriation of space in downtown Toronto.

Moreover, as they are cut out from being part of the exclusively white Canadian community and they long for belonging to either a place or a group, the protagonists of *What We All Long For* create a community built on the solidarity and conscious

understanding that each individual brings with her or him an ambivalent history of difference. Linked together by their ‘unspoken collaboration on distancing themselves as far as possible from the unreasonableness, the ignorance, the secrets, and the madness of their parents’ (WWALF, 19), they transcend spatial and ethnic boundaries by forging new cultural practices that no longer follow the traditional rules of ethnic belonging.

Feeling alienated from both the mainstream white Canadian society and from their families, they find fulfilment and safety in the community they form together with each other and which is perpetuated by and stands in opposition to the white racist society. In Chapter 11 for example, Oku cooks a cosmopolitan fusion meal for Tuyen, Carla, Jackie, Kumaran and his multicultural graffiti-crew, and a palpable sense of community, solidarity and belonging pervades the apartment where this heterogeneous group of friends meets for lunch. Similarly, the World Cup celebration is an occasion of union and connection for diasporic subjects of different ethnic groups and a cross-cultural moment that empowers members of minority groups. As for Tuyen, ‘she wasn’t Korean, of course, but the World Cup made her feel that way. No Vietnamese team had made it so today she was Korean’ (WWALF, 204). Despite being from different locations, these diasporic subjects are united by the fact that they are all immigrants in Canada and that they are part of the abstract community of belonging created by the shared experience of Diaspora.

Moving beyond traditional national and ethnic categories, Brand individuates new elements of connection and community inspired by the random sharings of people’s interests and efforts. This familiarity and common sense of belonging are feelings that Brand experiments herself in more than one occasion. For example, in her memory-note *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand narrates an episode in which while queueing at the airport for the security check she found herself among South

Asians, Africans, Arabs and Middle Eastern people and she felt ‘an unnameable familiarity among [them]. Empire’ (A MAP, 75).

In the novel *What We All Long For*, Brand shows that diasporic subjects face difficulties not only in establishing connections with the adopted country, but also in maintaining the roots which connected them to their country of origin. This difficulty is inherited by 2nd generation individuals who, although do not necessarily go through physical displacement, still experience diaspora as a conflict between the memory of their parents’ countries of origin and their lives in present countries. Stressing out the difference existing between moving to a place and being born there, Brand shows how the second generation is much more comfortable than its predecessor with a fluid conceptualization of home and how it is involved in a continuous negotiation with various spaces: the house, the city, the world at large.

As Brand herself is a migrant struggling to fit in and define herself among strangers, she has not only faced the issue of home and belonging on a professional level, but also on a personal one. Since the beginning of her career, the issues of Diaspora and belonging as well as the relationship between identity and place, have been some of her major concerns. Throughout her literary production, she has focused on the controversial issue of dislocation and rootlessness and has made an attempt to chart the routes of diaspora. In her body of work, and especially in the insightful book of discovery *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand traces the diasporic individuals’ pervading sense of being homeless and rootless back to the most traumatic of places for them: the Door of No Return. At any rate, Brand does not only show her interest in charting the way back to Africa, but also in drawing maps to new spaces filled with possibilities for the future. Since Brand does not want diasporic people’s identities and destinies to be irrevocably shaped and determined by their past of multiple

displacements, in her works she provides ‘new visions of the present-day cosmopolitan nation and of the new geopolitical spaces originated by the continuous emergence of diasporic movements in our contemporary globalized world’¹⁰¹ and attempts to create new spaces where a re-thinking and re-definition of one’s identity is possible.

As over the years Brand’s view on the relationship between place and identity has undergone a process of transformation, her body of work can be adopted to follow the trajectory of her shifting vision. In her early production, she demonstrates how the history of multiple displacements and the trauma of lack of specific origins hinder the diasporic individuals’ possibility of developing a sense of belonging and of finding a place to call home, and expresses her longing for home and belonging. The characters in her early works are lost alienated beings that manifest their refusal for the tragic and doomed place they live in, their nostalgia for their lost origin and roots, and their longing and yearning for a different space where freedom, belonging and transformation are possible. They are always on the move, always searching other ways of being in the world and other places where to feel some sense of belonging.

In her most recent publications, Brand still shows an overtly political engagement with creating a new kind of identity and existence, but she has rather expressed her rejection of origins, home and belonging. She has indeed adopted a more transnational approach instead of the the binary opposition of home and abroad, she has acknowledged new forms of community transcending the spatial and ethnic boundaries of belonging, and she has opted for a more inclusive poetics of drifting as a strategy to counter the limits of the nation-state and the swinging movement from here to there. As scholar Marlene Goldman points out,¹⁰² Brand’s diasporic characters both reject the model of the exile who is longing nostalgically for the lost origin, and the model of the

¹⁰¹ Sandra R. GOULART ALMEIDA, 2010, section II.

¹⁰² Marlene GOLDMAN, 2004, p. 13-29.

immigrant who is reoriented toward a new home and a new community to belong to. Her drifting diasporic characters reconfigure the idea of belonging by forging decentred, transnational connections that are no longer necessarily based on the concept of homeland or on ethnicity. Brand disrupts the old notions of selfhood and belonging and goes beyond the binary opposition between “home” and “abroad”, uncovering ‘a site for being that is open, neither nostalgic nor caught within the politics of inclusion/exclusion or an inside/outside dichotomy’.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Kit DOBSON, 2006, p. 89.

Chapter 4: Identity

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others...One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body...¹⁰⁴

Every one of us has to walk around apologising to white people for getting on that ship we got shoved onto five hundred years ago, every one of us has to apologise for the inconvenience of making white folks rich or privileged off our backs, we've got to apologise for still being around after we've been used up. The evidence of our skin is guilt enough for this good city (BOOS, 70-71)

Diaspora problematizes the historical and cultural mechanics of belonging. By breaking the connection existing between place and consciousness, it destroys the fundamental power of territory to determine one's identity and to create a collective shared common memory.

As identity should also be understood in relation to place, diasporic individuals are entwined in a complex set of identificatory relationships with at least two different places: their homeland and their host land. Either forced or willing to leave their mother country, diasporic subjects find themselves caught between different cultures and are confronted with a strong sense of loss, homelessness and unbelonging. According to Frantz Fanon, the diasporic Westernized individual is an exile in his own country who needs to escape from the influence of the white man's culture and turn back to his own roots and traditions in order not to feel 'without an anchor, without an horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless'.¹⁰⁵

As for Dionne Brand, the process of identity-making for people who have fractured or confused connections to multiple places is a central issue. In her body of work, she investigates the relation existing between one's identity and the external context, often

¹⁰⁴ W.E.B. DU BOIS, *The Souls of Black Folks*. 1903., New York: Vintage-Random House, 1990, p.8-9.

¹⁰⁵ Frantz FANON, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Penguin, London, 1967.

focusing on how the relationships with place and with other individuals inflect one's self-knowledge and well-being, and on the difficult situation of diasporic individuals who are cut off from their homelands and don't feel any sense of belonging to the place and community they live in.

4.1 Diasporic identities: blackness, double consciousness and Canadianness

The concept of diaspora challenges the “cultural and historical mechanics of belonging”¹⁰⁶ because it describes the dispersal of individuals from their homeland - across geographical and cultural borders -, it conjures up images of migration, fragmentation and resettlement, and it refers to the disruption and recreation of identity. Cultural theorist Paul Gilroy maps this personal development onto a “critical space/time cartography”¹⁰⁷ that questions the idea of belonging and traces new forms of national and ethnic belonging that are trans-border, nomadic, interstitial and multifaceted. These new forms of belonging turn out to be more suitable to represent the identities and the conditions of being of people whose lives have been disrupted by the diaspora (dis)location.

Global migration and resettlement delineate indeed new cartographies of empire and territoriality, creating a new cultural space that Homi Bhabha defines as a “third space where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences”.¹⁰⁸ Diasporic identities - which are usually understood as an expression of movement and relocation - live the dialectic between home and abroad and experiment a feeling of dislocation.

Investigating how the experience of migration influences the cultural identity of diasporic people, Stuart Hall efficiently observes that diasporic subjects should not form

¹⁰⁶ Paul GILROY, 2000, p.123.

¹⁰⁷ Paul GILROY, 2000, p.117.

¹⁰⁸ Homi BHABHA, *The location of culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, p.218.

their identities in relation to their homeland or their past, but instead, on an evolving quest. In 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' he suggests that cultural identity 'is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being". It belongs to the future as much as to the past'.¹⁰⁹ Given this perspective, black people in the diaspora do not think of their cultural identity as something given, fixed, but as an ongoing process of production. 'Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning'.¹¹⁰

As Stuart Hall points out, 'the more social life becomes mediated by the global marketing of styles, places and images, by international travel, and by globally networked media images and communications systems, the more identities become detached – disembedded – from specific times, places, histories, and traditions, and appear free-floating'.¹¹¹ This is in line with Zygmunt Bauman's thesis that the old, stable bonds structuring society, community and family in the past are gradually being replaced by new concepts of identity which are liquid, flexible and ongoing. Moreover, since diasporic subjects are caught between different worlds, cultures and languages, and constantly have to negotiate their identities, their diasporic experience is marked by doubleness. Paul Gilroy defines this condition as the "condition of being in pain" because it is characterized by the diasporic individuals' paradoxical status of being in the West, but not being part of it.

As a child living in the Caribbean, Brand herself experiences this double identity and with reference to her people she admits: "we were inhabited by British consciousness. We were also inhabited by an unknown self. The African" (A MAP, 17).

¹⁰⁹ Stuart HALL, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', 1990, available online at <http://www.unipa.it/~michele.cometa/hall_cultural_identity.pdf>, p.225.

¹¹⁰ Stuart HALL, 1990, p.226.

¹¹¹ Stuart HALL, 1996, p. 622.

This doubleness is something that diasporic subjects learn to deal with since their childhood and it is even made worse by the educational system that ends up increasing diasporic individuals' sense of loss, duality and unbelonging. With reference to the educational system, James Walker writes:

In the Anglo-dominated schools they have been taught that the heroes are white; the accomplishments have been attained by whites, the nation was built by whites, all of which leaves black as intruders or at best hangers-on in a flow of history that ignores them. Small wonder, then, that blacks often feel that they do not really belong here, or that they have derived an image of their own worth that has been defined by others ¹¹²

As regards this issue, Brand writes:

We went to school to become people we were not, we went to school to become people we would not be ashamed of, we went to school to uplift the new Black nation, we went to school to get enough qualifications to become people who could be accepted to the country we were seeking independence from. We went to school not to become ourselves but to get rid of ourselves. We had two languages, two personalities. Two lives. We entered into a conspiracy, a bargain with ourselves, our parents, communities and nations, to live this duality (BOOS, 176)

Brand feels inescapably bound to the British consciousness, yet she is not able to fully belong to it because of both historical reasons and distance from the British centre. In her essays collection *Bread Out of Stone*, she recognizes the gap between her experience and the white experience:

We didn't go to Woodstock, we couldn't stand John Lennon and the Beatles, we couldn't care less if Elvis lived or died [...]. There was no comfortable identity to fall back on, no suburb waiting, it wasn't our mothers and fathers we were defying, it was history (BOOS, p. 29-30)

¹¹² James WALKER, *A History of Blacks in Canada: A Study guide for Teachers and Students*. Hull: Canadian Government Publishing Centre, 1980, p. 5.

At the same time, she neither has a real connection with or access to the African consciousness as:

Very few family stories, few personal stories have survived have survived among millions of descendants of the trade. Africa is therefore a place strictly of the imagination – what is imagined therefore is a gauzy, elliptical, generalized, vague narrative of place (A MAP, 25)

For Brand, many difficulties arise from both sides of her split identity and as a result she states that “this duality was fought every day from the time one woke up to the time one fell asleep” (A MAP, 17). Moreover, after moving to Canada, Brand experiences a split between her identity as a Canadian and as a person of colour and in the poetry collection *Land to Light On* states:

I have been losing roads
and tracks and air and rivers and little thoughts
and smells and incidents and a sense of myself (LAND, p. 15)

As well as other diasporic individuals, Brand struggles to find a balance between the traditional African self and the westernized diasporic one, and a positioning and sense of belonging in the host land, but this effort is hindered by racist stereotypes on blackness. Indeed, as in other Western countries, in Canada blackness is othered by the dominant white national hegemony that identifies black individuals as external, non-Canadians. As Brand explains, the ‘inclusion in or access to Canadian identity, nationality and citizenship (de facto) depended and depends on one’s relationship to the whiteness’ (BOOS, 187).

There is an ongoing debate in Canada on this issue. As Michael Buma questions, the dilemma is simply: “should Canada have a unified and homogeneous national

identity, or is Canadianness best expressed through diversity, tolerance, pluralism, and multiculturalism?”¹¹³

As for Brand, in the discourse of national belonging and definition of Canadian identity, she affirms that ‘national identity is a dance of artificiality [...] that obscures its own multiplicity by insisting on itself as unchanging’ (A MAP, 72) and brings the concept of “impossible origins” for diasporic descendants of African slaves, arguing that “too much has been made of origins”. Through her literary production, she underlines the impossibility of any homogenous national identity, shows her interest in moving beyond the framing category of nation and works toward the development of a new enabling position of citizenship that would accommodate difference and be transnational and democratic. She offers alternatives to nationality and belonging since she negotiates her identity between three different poles – Africa, the Caribbean and Canada – and presents a new kind of transnational citizenship.

Having realized that she will never be able to belong to a single place, she declares:

I am not a refugee
I have my papers
I was born in the Caribbean,
Practically in the sea,
Fifteen degrees above the equator
I have a Canadian passport,
I have lived here all my adult life,
I am stateless anyway (CHRON, 70)

Moreover, although in *Bread Out of Stone* she argues that there is a common awareness and agreement about the non-existence of a homogeneous Canadian identity,

¹¹³ Michael BUMA, ‘Soccer and the City: The Unwieldy National in Dionne Brand’s “What We All Long For”’. In *Canadian Literature*, Vancouver, Autumn 2009, Iss. 202, p. 22.

she provocatively and ironically admits the existence of an “official” Canadianness which ‘functions to exclude as it functions to define. [...] It excludes and evades immigrants, regardless of their length of citizenship, either through race or language, and suggests that they pass a kind of mean test of Canadianness over and over again’ (BOOS, 137).

Since immigration is generally conceived as the act of ‘fleeing a horrible past/place and arriving gratefully at an unblemished present/place’(BOOS, 138), there is a widespread common idea that implies the necessity for diasporic subjects in foreign countries to leave behind or even erase their identities – their past, their language, their memory. This perspective ignores that immigration cannot necessarily be a choice and that immigrants might – and indeed as Brand demonstrates they do – face great difficulties in the new place and might not feel necessarily “grateful”. This approach aimed at assimilating diasporic subjects into the dominant culture is based on the general assumption that immigrants are inferior and must be assimilated in the dominant superior culture/group as to become part of it. This attitude is defective because the act of emptying out one’s identity in favour of the more homogeneous Canadianness – or Westernness in general – represents a loss of ‘the creativity, knowledges, imaginings, dreamings, life experiences that enhance human beings’ (BOOS, 138). Furthermore, this approach is of course very limiting as it reinforces the binary opposition between colonizer/superior and colonized/inferior, it maintains asymmetrical power relations and it perpetuates racism and discrimination.

As a matter of fact, in her writings, Brand shows that no matter how long black diasporic individuals have been living in Canada, they continue to be immaterial to the national white identity and unable to join the so ‘called “Regular Canadian life.” The crucial piece, of course, [is] that they [are] not the required race’ (WWALF, 47). Indeed, although half of Toronto’s current population was born outside Canada,

whiteness is still privileged and integration is still a difficult process. While white skin is 'the signifier for socio-economic opportunity and privilege and [...] racial superiority' (BOOS, 125), black skin becomes the element of distinction and difference that marks black individuals and makes them suffer from incessant and gratuitous humiliation and racial discrimination.

In her collection of essays *Bread Out of Stone*, Brand describes her anxiety about going to the cinema, as she fears that she 'would see on the screen the place [black individuals] occupied in the world, [...] how much better white people lived [...] and how far away to reach to that living was because [they] would have to reach into white skin to live it' (BOOS, 7). As Brand points out, the tyrannical concept of whiteness becomes more and more 'the way to differentiate the coloniser from the colonised' (BOOS, 187) by excluding other cultures and repressing 'the life possibilities of people of colour' (BOOS, 189). For black immigrants, race represents a marker and a determinant of access to economic and social mobility.

In *Bread Out of Stone*, Brand also describes black individuals' impossibility of getting a good job as in the white man's world there are jobs especially designated for blacks. She states: "It was 1970. A kitchen then, but not an office. My sister worked the kitchens of hospitals, and that is where I find a job the next week, and that is where we waited out the ebb and flow of favour and need in this white place" (BOOS, 42). And later resignedly adds that although some of them received a good education and had remarkable past working experiences, "the average best we could become was a nurse or a typist, exceptions notwithstanding, or the romance of Black desire would land us single mothers or on the walk" (BOOS, 67). By depicting Canada's tendency to belittle foreign accreditation and to relegate skilled immigrants to low-paying sectors, Brand shows that the power structure and the economic system in Canada still depend on racism.

In the poetry collection *Primitive Offensive*, Canto VI, Brand shows the effects of mimicry on a black woman from Madagascar living in France who tries to “cover” her blackness by surrendering herself to the colonizer French culture, eating “pommes frites” and dressing in the latest European fashions. Some black subjects happen indeed to strive to look like white subjects in an attempt to assimilate themselves, to minimize the racism they encounter and to appropriate the power granted to white-skinned people. Nevertheless, Brand observes that despite all her efforts this woman is a victim of discrimination and holds a demeaning low-paying job, because she looks and is ‘almost the same but not white’.¹¹⁴

As a matter of fact, her race and sex render her vulnerable to discrimination in the French society she has readily adopted and accepted as her own. Similarly, in the essay collection *Bread Out of Stone*, Brand tells the story of a black child covering his face with the white powder of the chalk dust in an attempt to cover his blackness. This extreme action shows the little boy’s awareness of the cruel ‘lesson of this society and his inability to accomplish: [...] whiteness gives you grace, blackness plunges you into madness’. (BOOS, 64).

As a child in the Caribbean, Brand herself experiences how the colour of one’s skin marks an element of distinction and observes that her ‘teacher liked her light-skinned son better than her dark-skinned son, and she was always screaming at her dark-skinned son, slapping him behind the head, and we all knew why, because all the light-skinned girls sat in the front of the classroom and the dark-skinned ones in back’ (BOOS, 49-50). Later, as an adult in Canada, she once again has to deal with widespread forms of prejudice and discrimination. In the poetry collection *No Language is Neutral*, Brand points out how her education in Canada reinforces the otherness of her racial identity:

¹¹⁴ Homi BHABHA, 1994, p. 89.

This is the part that is always difficult, the walk each
Night across the school yard, biting my tongue
[...] stumbling over
unworded white faces (NLIN, 29)

In the essay collection *A Map to the Door of No Return*, with reference to white people, Brand states that “they are suspicious of strangers. I can only imagine nightmarishly what they think of me” (A MAP, 145). Moreover, in a section of *Land to Light On*, the snow-covered apparently peaceful Canadian landscape acquires a racist hostile dimension when Brand depicts a scene in which a police officer stops

Three Blacks in a car on a road blowing eighty miles an hour
in the wind between a gas station and Chatham. We stumble
on our antiquity. The snow-blue laser of a cop’s eyes fixes us
in this unbearable archaeology. (LAND, 73)

Drawing on elements of Canada’s cold northern climate to articulate the migrant’s experience of living in Canada, Brand reinforces the distant and cold attitude of the nation’s white population towards black individuals and the unspoken racism spread in Toronto, Montreal, Sudbury and other Canadian cities. Stressing the similarity existing between the inclemency and inhospitality of Canadian winter weather and the unfriendliness and hostility of a white policeman, Brand depicts the fact as a sort of revelation of the hidden topography of racism permeating Canadian society:

In this country where islands vanish, bodies submerge,
the heart of darkness in these white roads, snow
at our throats, and at the windshield a thick white cop
in a blue steel windbreaker peering into our car, suspiciously,
even in the blow and freeze of a snowstorm, or perhaps

not suspicion but as a man looking at aliens. (LAND, 73)

No matter if Black identities might seem to vanish and submerge in Canada, due to racial stereotyping and discrimination people of African descent are all treated as “aliens” and subjects of institutionalised racism.

The condition of living of black diasporic individuals is indeed paradoxical. On one side, they are ghost-like belittled presences living in the margins, far from the centres of economic and political power. As Brand observes in *No Language is Neutral* immigrants are ‘the thin mixture of just come and don’t exist’ (NLIN, 26) stressing that the colour of their skins make diasporic black subjects non-existent in Canada. On the other side, the blackness of their skins makes them highly visible and victims of forms of oppression and discrimination.

In his article *A Tough Geography: Towards a Poetics of Black Space(s) in Canada*, Rinaldo Walcott focuses on the contemporary social situation in Canada and discusses how blackness is ‘situated on a continuum that runs from the invisible to the hyper-visible’.¹¹⁵ Blackness indeed renders diasporic individuals of colour simultaneously invisible through forms of alienation and marginalization, and hyper-visible through acts of discrimination, haunting down and incrimination.

Being aware that black skin colour is detected as a marker of delinquency as ‘all you need is a black face to be considered suspicious’ (A MAP, 46), Brand herself in the essay collection *Bread Out of Stone* points out that ‘the new tactic is to dehumanise and terrorise Black people through brutality and surveillance [...] and to mount a massive and persuasive propaganda war on Black people in North America as a whole, labelling [them] drug addicts, criminals and whiners’ (BOOS, 72). Pointing at the brutality and harshness of the legal system towards black skinned individuals, Brand affirms that ‘this

¹¹⁵ Rinaldo WALCOTT, 2004, p. 278.

city, Toronto the Good, sets the police on [black men] for hanging on the streets, for appearing in their own skins in malls and parking lots, and chases them down back alleys when they become so injured they try to kill themselves with drugs rather than looking at their image' (BOOS, 61). According to Brand, police abuses and killings of black people are common in Canada and North America as a whole because 'cops always want to just draw guns when they see Black folks. It's like in their genetic code or something' (BOOS, 35).

The widespread perception that black skin and criminality are inexorably linked together is just one example of the negative images, stereotypes and labels associated to blackness. As Brand observes, media plays a critical role in reinforcing the association between race and crime:

the newspaper said before Black people came here there was no racism, the newspaper said before Black youth there was no crime, the newspaper said we live in a multicultural society, the newspaper said when people come here they just have to leave their culture behind and become Canadian, the newspaper said multiculturalism was costing too much money, the newspaper said soon there'll be more people of colour than whites here, the newspaper said you had to be white to be Canadian (BOOS, 60-61)

And later adds,

they say cut back immigration from countries that are not compatible with Canadian culture, meaning white culture. They say immigrants are taking away Canadian jobs, as if immigration is something altruistic and not about the economy and cheap labour (BOOS, 73)

In her writings, Brand points out how media perpetuate racism, xenophobia and hate towards people of colour making integration and cooperation much more difficult. She also underlines that Canada is far from being the multicultural utopia it presents itself as and shows the insidiousness of racism in a country where verbal and physical

assaults, racial segregation and blatant discrimination in housing and employment were – and often still are – the norm for black migrants.

4.2 Brand's identity: woman, black and lesbian

A diasporic woman writer of colour, Brand explores throughout her literary career both her ethnic and her sexual identities and argues that she cannot separate her gender from her race and therefore cannot speak merely as a woman or as a racialized individual. In the essay collection *Bread Out of Stone*, she comments:

I remember a white woman asking me how did I decide which to be – Black or woman – and when. As if she didn't have to decide which to be, white or woman, and when. As if there were a moment I wasn't a woman and a moment I wasn't Black, as if there were a moment she wasn't white (BOOS, 10-11).

In her writings, Brand exemplifies the othering that black diasporic female subjects inevitably face when connecting or relating to other people in the western societies and explores the dangerous circumstances in which black female subjects experience identity formation. Black Canadian women are indeed targets of a double discrimination: they are attacked both on the basis of their ethnicity and on their gender.

In the collection *Sans Souci and Other Stories*, there are good examples of the racial discrimination daily affecting black diasporic women's lives. In the short story "No rinsed blue sky, no red flower fences" for example, Brand depicts the difficult life of a black woman illegally living in Canada. Her condition is one of marginality and invisibility to the system and therefore she can't help but feel 'pity for her blackness and her woman's body' (SS, 68). Excluded from participation in a society that privileges white skin and male sex, the protagonist of this short story is 'black, silent and unsmiling' (SS,87) and her presence is almost erased. She remains nameless throughout

the whole story, thus emphasizing her lack of presence and representation through language.

Moreover, in the story “Train to Montreal”, a black woman traveling to Montreal feels uncomfortable with the universal whiteness of all other passengers on a train and also with the blackness of her body that is scanned by other travellers’ intimidating looks. Not only does race mark her as different from the others, but also her sex makes her a vulnerable target for the lecherous men on board. She is verbally assaulted in terms of her race and gender by a white drunk businessman while the other passengers remain completely indifferent. The scene shows how black experience is made silent and absent by society’s indifference and complacency in the face of injustice. Brand stresses how the grossest cruelty is represented by the choice of the crowd to ignore the incident, rather than abhor the offensive cruel act of the white man. The silence of the other passengers is indeed the crime that insults and erases black experience the most.

Similarly, in Brand’s first novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, Verlia is verbally assaulted by a young skinny white man who screams: ‘Go back to where you came from! Go back to the jungle, niggers!’ (IAPNH, 173). Verlia expects to find embarrassment, compassion and reassurance from a nearby woman who has witnessed the whole scene, but to her great disappointment she finds out a matching hate from her side and admits to herself that “a man’s hate she might have been ready for but not a woman’s” (IAPNH, 173).

In *Winter Epigrams*, Brand’s poetic self is also presented as a victim of racism when a stranger in an elevator hatefully calls her “whore, nigger whore” (WINTER, p. 17) and although she had “planned the answer all [her] life / rehearsed [her]fuck offs” she is not able to respond to this sexist, racist attack. Indeed, while her own words fail her, the words of others assume great power and increase her vulnerability.

Furthermore, in a section of *Land to Light On*, Brand questions why a rude man driving by her and yelling an obscenity at her out of his truck window has the power to ‘split [her] heart open’(LAND, 4):

If the trees don't flower and colour refuse to limn
when a white man in a red truck on a rural road
jumps out at you, screaming his exact hatred
of the world, his faith extravagant and earnest
and he threatens, something about your cunt,
you do not recover (LAND, 4)

In the final poem of the same collection Brand shows once again how gender and race are causes of discrimination and how they easily transform black diasporic subjects into vulnerable easy targets of violent attacks:

a woman gutted
and hung in a prayer, run on with fingers, sacredly
stitched, called history and victory and government
halls, simmered in the residue of men crying vinegar,
every chapter of the world describe a woman at her own
massacre, carvings of her belly, blood gouache blood
of her face, hacked in revolutions of the sun and kitchens
[...] Someone crawling
at a game of soldiers with a dog's chain and in urine,
“I love the KKK” written on his back and his white comrades
braying and kicking, someone who
the next morning will confess to his skin
and all tribunals saying, no, no, I did not feel that. It was not
race. (LAND, 96, 98-99)

Moreover, in the essay collection *Bread Out of Stone* an extreme example of racial and sexual discrimination can be found. Here, Brand comments on the pervasive

abjection of black female subjects in North America that leads a twenty-something black woman to become complicit with the dominant regulations of the black body by apostrophizing herself publically through a degrading name. Brand writes:

In the nihilism spawned in young Black people today in America, in the deep self-hatred that is their piece of the American pie, in the denigration fed to them like bread, and in her most self-annihilating moment, Patsy Jones nicknamed her young and innocent self ‘Gangster Bitch’, perhaps because she needed a fearsome name to beat the fearsome street that she knew was gonna get her somehow, [...] maybe she didn’t know anything at all but just repeated what she’d understood as the designated ideological form of femininity for Black women on this continent (BOOS, 126)

No matter the forces locating black female subjects as ‘demonic, evil, worthless and sexually degraded’ (BOOS, 127) in North America are mainly the result of white male supremacism, Brand suggests that young black women like Patsy Jones, who assumes this negative identification as their own, perform a gesture of self-hatred and foster the cultural subjugation of black women.

An ongoing exploration of the long history of violence against women and racialized people and of the formation and representation of the self, Brand’s writings show how the black female body is inevitably inscribed by its memories and experiences of a colonial past of slavery and exploitation. Moreover, pointing at the unavoidable correlation between the subject and its body, Brand shows how the black female body cannot be isolated from its political and social context – a context dominated by white male discourses –, how it is regulated within the social sphere according to dominant hierarchies of difference – gender, race, class and sexuality –, and how it can represent a site of action and resistance by which black diasporic women can articulate their selfhood.

As the implications of being black and female are deeply rooted in social and cultural exchanges, limitations of the body are taught and learnt with every interaction. Indeed, even in comfortable social settings, such as a family environment, black women experience restrictions and discriminations based on their bodies. In the poetry collection *No Language is Neutral*, Brand recalls her mother's experience and the impossibility to find an escape to the double bind of race and sex:

A woman who
Thought she was human but got the message, female
And black and somehow those who gave it to her
Were like family, mother and brother, spitting woman
At her (NLIN, 24)

As for her mother experience, Brand points out that although she is not racially othered in her family; she is discriminated against and denigrated for being a woman. As for her own experience, Brand observes instead that although her education in Canada releases her from gender stereotypes and discrimination, it reinforces the otherness related to her racial identity:

Here is escape at least from femininity,
But not from the envy of colony, education, the list of
Insults is for this, better than, brighter than, richer
Than (NLIN, 29)

In *No Language is Neutral*, Brand shows a keen awareness of the multiple ways in which the body affects, circumscribes and determines individual black women's lives. At the beginning of the poetry collection, she creates a sort of community of resistance and black womanhood by articulating celebrative descriptions of black women who have resisted the dominant institutions of power in the racist and sexist

societies in which they have been severely oppressed. The lives of Brand's inspirational black foremothers and sisters are determined and affected by their racialized and sexualized bodies. For example, her foremother Mammy Prater – an ex-slave whose exploitation results from her racialization – is a woman who waits to pass her story to younger generations in order to empower and enrich them with tales of their own history that would otherwise be erased and denied them. Moreover, Phyllis Coard, a black skinned girl who is imprisoned after the American invasion of Grenada, stands as an example of how gendered female body determines a woman's treatment:

I know they treat you bad
like a woman
called you *hyena*, a name enjoining
you alone to biology and not science,
you should have known
the first thing they would jump on
was the skill of your womb... (NLIN, 9)

Brand does not only celebrate inspiring strong politically-active women who struggle to maintain their humanity within a nation culture that devalues their race and gender, but also attempts to recover and reclaim her own genealogical origins by writing her female ancestry back into existence, and tries to provide new visions of and possibilities for an improved future.

Her project is to expose how diasporic bodies are totally imprinted by history and to recall the process of mistreatment and destruction of the black body in order to finally liberate it from such burden. Her characters indeed carry the burden of a history of physical violence and oppression, and strive for re-appropriating their bodies.

According to Brand, the body can also represent a site of resistance as it can be used to contest social forces and resist the determinism of the host land. Indeed, to claim

one's body as a territory owned by oneself allows not only the possibility of constructing a social space and claiming it, but also the possibility for social transformation. In her body of work, Brand attempts to dislodge the black female body from dominant readings and discourses by offering new alternative representations of it and asserts that a reconceptualization, negotiation and repositioning of the self must be struggled for.

A lesbian of colour, Brand does not only give a glimpse of the complex relationship among the divisions of "black" and "woman", but also explores the implications of being "lesbian". As each of her identities is inseparable from the other because she is never a woman, a person of colour, a lesbian at one time, Brand does not privilege her identification as an African over her gender classification and sexual orientation and rather states: "I am a woman, Black and lesbian; the evidence of this is inescapable and interesting" (BOOS, 20).

Besides being othered for her race and gender - which are sources of inescapable discrimination for black women -, Brand is also othered for her sexual identity and shows great courage by revealing her same-sex sexual orientation, a trait that brings upon her even further oppression. In her writings indeed, Brand articulates her race, gender and sexual identities, and exemplifies the othering occurring when black female lesbian individuals connects or relates to other people in the Canadian society. Her project is to representationally unite the fragments that constitute her identity in order to find agency and coherence. In the essay collection *Bread Out of Stone*, she writes, "since these things are inseparable, and since I do not wish to be separated from them, I own them and take on the responsibility of defending them. I have a choice in this" (BOOS, 13).

Although in her writings Brand seems to suggest that a full articulation of the self in dominant discourses and spaces is impossible, she shows how in the private

intimate sphere of sexual desire black diasporic individuals become empowered and can imagine new ways to express themselves through the gestures and the performances of their bodies. Indeed, they overcome the dominant regulations of the black female body and achieve the greatest freedom and articulation of selfhood through the eroticization of the body and the lesbian desire. She also suggests that the lesbian subject must exploit the new sense of selfhood acquired during private intimate moments of desire as a way to empower one's self in the public sphere.

In the poetry collection *No Language is Neutral*, Brand challenges and disrupts the unity of the heterosexist society by claiming her lover's body and her own and by asserting her lesbian presence and her relationship. In the section "Hard against the soul", after a series of love poems in which the black body of the speaker's lover is presented as sensual and erotic, Brand explains that the pleasure of private desire does not completely have the power to annihilate the pain of public suffering and subjugation:

listen, just because I've spent these
few verses fingering this register of the heart,
clapping life, as a woman on a noisy beach,
calling blood into veins dry and sand,
do not think that things escape me,
this drawn skin of hunger twanging as a bow,
this shiver whistling into the white face of capital, a
shadow traipsing, icy veined and bloodless through
city alleys of wet light, the police bullet glistening
through a black woman's spine in November, against
red pools of democracy bursting the hemisphere's
seams, the heart sinks, and sinks like a moon (NLIN, 41)

Moving from the freedom and intimate pleasures of the body in private contests to its public suffering and fragmentation in the outside world, the speaker underlines

indeed that these corporal experiences represents only temporary moments of resistance and empowerment, which become incorporated into the characters' subjectivities and to which they can imaginatively return once they find themselves again in the public sphere. The speaker also stresses the necessity for the black female individuals to make the best from their private moments of empowerment to struggle to claim selfhood and new different positionings in public space and discourses.

Another example can be found in the novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, where Elizete finds immediate relief from all the forms of exploitation affecting her existence in the intimate space she creates together with Verlia, but this space is neither permanent nor entirely distinct from the outside world. Indeed, the new self and the new possibilities she envisions in her intimate connection with Verlia are significant because they occur in opposition to the ongoing public regulation of her black female body. Through her relationship with Verlia, Elizete is given a respite from the harsh labour and sexual subordination and is finally able to transcend the brutality of her physical life and the subjugation of her interior life. Moreover, through her lesbian love relationship, she is able to overcome the gap between her class and Verlia's. The desire between these two women – who achieve sameness in gender and race, but are very different in their formal education and social status – is positive because it does not only allow for social-consciousness, but also for social-rising and elevation of the status of other black women. Here too, Brand represents the transformative possibilities and the positive effects of lesbian desire as a form of resistance that can gradually help to defeat the masculinist, patriarchal and heterosexist economy.

In her first works, Brand shows to be aware that without a unifying discourse she is not able to represent her entire subjectivity at once, but rather has always to be content with juxtaposing the components against one other. At any rate, as she cannot choose whether or not to be “Black or woman”, her poetic self initially speaks against

racism and sexism separately and only later - after having recognized that her race and gender are inseparable - begins to address them simultaneously. Once she achieves that, Brand is finally able to investigate her lesbianism, find a community in which she belongs, accept each of her identities and represent herself in an authentic way.

4.2 Representations of identity in Brand's novels

Triply othered by her race, gender and sexual orientation in a world dominated by white men, Brand is committed not only to giving voice to her own experience as a lesbian of colour, but also to writing the marginalized lives of diasporic black women because 'their stories were becoming lies because nobody wanted to listen, nobody had the time. That's what happens to a story if nobody listens and nobody has the time, it flies off and your mouth stays open' (IAPNH, 60).

In her body of works, Brand portrays the process of degradation and discrimination of black women based on the gender and race inscribed in their bodies and explores the implications of existing in a marginalized space through the creation of restrained black female characters who 'got the message, female / and black' (NLIN, 24). Her black-skinned characters are located within a spatial trajectory moving from Africa, to the Caribbean and Canada, and within an historical trajectory going from the colonial period up to the present. Positioned as subordinate and other, the protagonists of her novels are strong diasporic women that do not only have to face a wall of discrimination and prejudice, and are subject to marginalization and are reduced to demeaning poorly-paid jobs, but also respond with resistance to their subordinate status as black immigrants in a white society.

Her first novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, suggests new ways of thinking about the politics of love – specifically the sexual erotic love between two black women – as a

challenge to the economic and political structures limiting the possibilities for diasporic individuals in our contemporary era.

At the beginning of the novel, Elizete's life in the Caribbean is dominated by an oppressive system of class and gender relations and her body is regulated through painful backbreaking work and sexual violence. She is treated as a possession, exploited in the harsh work in the plantation and abused by her own husband. The marks of the exploitation are well visible on Elizete's body: her legs have scars from the razor-like leaves of the sugarcane stalks and from the whip of her husband.

Elizete recognizes that her destiny is defined by the subordination of her body to the conditions of production and reproduction as 'all it have for a woman to do is lie down and let a man beat against she body, and work cane and chop up she foot and make children' (IAPNH, 4). And also admits that she 'never wanted anything big from the world. Who is me to want anything big or small. Who is me to think I something? I work to clean Isaiah' house and work cane since I was a child [...] and all I have to do is lay down under him in the night and work cane in the day' (IAPNH, 4). Her marriage and her work represent indeed two brutal oppressive forces that violate her body and impede her agency.

Elizete recognizes being subject to an oppressive social configuration and although her recurring dreams of rebellion against and escape from her condition, she cannot alter her position until Verlia's arrival. This encounter marks both her sexual and her political awakening because while before meeting Verlia she lived in a sleeping, trance-like state, after that 'everything make sense from the way flesh make sense settling into blood' (IAPNH, 6). No matter the sexual abuses and the severe exploitation she is subject to, Elizete manages to free her body first by neglecting it and then by re-appropriating and celebrating it through love, grace and sensuality in her relationship with Verlia. Indeed, by re-inscribing her body outside the dominating forces of her

marriage and her labour, Elizete conceives new possibilities for herself and is able to articulate herself differently in relation to the gendered hierarchies of production and reproduction and to defy the inscription of her body according to the class and gender oppressive systems perpetuated by the space of the plantation.

Following Brand's own path of migration, after her lover's death, Elizete moves to Canada in an effort to inhabit the very same space as her lover did. Upon her arrival in Toronto, Elizete is warned about the inhospitality of the city and the difficulties of living there as a black female immigrant, and she is told by her fellow countrywoman Abena: "Go home, this is not a place for us" (IAPNH, 61). Abena is indeed well conscious that Canada is not the place for diasporic female subjects to live. Toronto is 'a place to make money, someone had said to her, not a place to live. What money could be made? None if your skin was black and nothing hanging between your legs' (IAPNH, 229).

The construction and reading of subjectivities according to sexual and racial hierarchies is something inherited from the past and from the history of slavery. Elizete recognizes that the socio-economic spaces she inhabits in both her natal and adoptive home are shaped by the colonial past and admits: "Impermeance, which perhaps you felt all along. Perhaps it was built into you long before you came and coming was not so much another place but travelling, a continuation, absently, the ringing in your ears of iron bracelets on stones, the ancient wicked music of chain" (IAPNH, 65).

When she arrives in Toronto indeed, she is defined by white Canadians in terms of the labour she is expected to perform as a black female immigrant: 'she'd been told about kitchens and toilets and floors and sewing machines and cuffs and rubber and paint spray and even been offered some sidewalks' (IAPNH, 49). As her female black body speaks her gender and racial difference, Elizete lacks the freedom of choosing her

position and has to turn to the type of work that the city demands of her body and that she will share with other black women.

In Toronto, Elizete faces new forms of exploitation and oppression and must perform hard sweatshop labour that leaves her with both physical marks and psychological scars. At any rate, Elizete tries to maintain control over her subjectivity and interior self through its separation from the surface bodily appearances first by asserting her power to re-name her body and assuming the name of Gloria, then by refusing to acknowledge this new name and pretending to be deaf so that she is able to ignore her white master's commands. In this way she is doubly defended from having her body signify her inner subjectivity and she can disengage herself from her body and the social space it occupies.

Another solution Elizete deploys to escape from the economic and sexual regulations imposed on her, is to estrange her inner self from the physicality of her body and its performances. As an example, in order to defend herself from the brutality and violence of sexual abuses, during episodes of rape she separates her body from her interior life by imaginatively leaving her body behind and retreating to the safer place of the sand quarry and by imagining that is the sand that is consuming her body.

The sexual brutalization of her body suffered under her husband Isaiah is replicated by men in Toronto. Elizete is ruthlessly raped by her employer while working as a domestic servant and bears the marks of this violence: 'the fingers of her left hand [...] are swollen. Her eyes are bloody, almost closed. There is a bruise under her waist, under a rib' (IAPNH, 92-93). Elizete is also raped by a man she does not know, but who perceives his power over her because of her status as an illegal immigrant and her impossibility to report the crime: "He says this is the procedure, he says you have no rights here, he says I can make it easier for you if you want, you could get sent back" (IAPNH, 89).

Indeed, the combination of her multiple identities - which are determined by her body and by the “laws” of the social sphere -, together with her status as an illegal immigrant mark Elizete’s sexual vulnerability. ‘Like countless Black women enduring the sexual predations of their owners over the centuries of slavery, Elizete, an illegal immigrant, has no legal recourse and is again left with only the singular option to flight.’¹¹⁶ Her status of illegal immigrant marks her powerlessness as it prevents her from going either to hospital or the police and her condition of isolation does not allow her to tell anyone about the violence she suffered. Since structures of social and political power refuse to recognize her, Elizete is legible to the Canadian state not as a victim of exploitation and rape, but rather as a perpetrator of crime. In her case, some fundamental human rights – such as freedom from discrimination, security of life, fair compensation for labour – are not recognized.

Moreover, as moving to a new place also entails the need to adopt a new language, to accustom to a new culture and to leave behind some important aspects of one’s identity, Elizete once again experiences feelings of doubleness and unbelonging, and feels ‘each morning as two people – one that had to be left behind and the other’ (IAPNH, 61). In Toronto, her ability and willingness to form connections with the surroundings by the act of naming things and places – a practice that in the Caribbeans allowed her to fill herself with a sense of identity, relatedness and belonging, and to enjoy a richer, more complete sense of self – are challenged by the alienating urban landscape of Canada’s largest city. As the results of the process of self-definition are shattered, Elizete finds herself again struggling with her identity and is not able to establish a familial relation with her surroundings.

As for Verlia, when she flights from her native island and first arrives in Canada, she witnesses a new form of internalized racism, discrimination and “self-hate”

¹¹⁶ Pamela MC CALLUM, Christian OLBHEY, 1999, Iss. 68.

(IAPNH, 170) as she recognizes her uncle and aunt's attempts to distance themselves from the black community living in Sudbury. Her uncle explains her that 'nobody can treat you bad, [...] is up to you, in your mind, to know who you is. People can't treat you bad. Is only your mind can think that. You just like white people. It have no difference. Is in your own mind' (IAPNH, 141). At any rate, this naïve positive belief is soon disappointed by the general judgement on and discrimination of their blackness. As a result, her uncle and aunt, who are described as 'two black people broken to the wind in Sudbury' (IAPNH, 164) try to keep a low profile in order not to be noticed and to 'show white people that they are harmless, just like them' (IAPNH, 142) and suggest Verlia not to 'bring any of that Blackness here, we're ordinary people, we have to convince them that we're ordinary' (IAPNH, 142) and to 'be what they want you to be, tighten your stride, be as thin as burnt paper, taste dust, you're a nigger, be good nigger, serve, find some nondescript white people [...] and genuflect' (IAPNH, 149-150).

Verlia cannot understand how her uncle and aunt can live trying to keep their blackness a secret to avoid the trouble of their skin and negotiating their true selves to fit in the role white people have arranged for them. As a result, once she arrives in Toronto, she tries to find new ways to fill herself with some sense of belonging and to enjoy a more complete sense of identity as 'there was the side of her she had to return to for it; the one missing for years, the one she'd first cut away, then traded away little by little' (IAPNH, 97). As an example, she focuses on the act of decorating and personalising the blank empty spaces of her rented rooms as for her it represents a material opportunity to keep a private safe space, to start a new life and identity, and to define herself in opposition to the white male-dominated society she lives in. Indeed, the control over her individual space is to be perceived as a first step to achieve individual freedom and to define her own identity.

Moreover, although Verlia is well-aware of Fanon's teaching that "in the struggle for liberation individualism is the first to disappear" (IAPNH, 158), she tries to give expression to her true black self by taking active part in a community. While at the beginning her experience is somehow negative because the communities of Blacks seem to suffocate her as they will not let her 'liquefy, make fluid, grow into her Black self' (IAPNH, 149), then she is able to find a new kind of community in the Movement, allowing her to maintain the balance between her personal subjective needs and the social collective concerns. Nevertheless, she later admits that the distancing from her comrades can also represent a 'good opportunity to distance [her]self, to collect [her]self' (IAPNH, 219), as she perceives that the community can both give strength to and weaken the diasporic individual. Indeed, for black diasporic individuals, finding refuge in black communities has both the positive effect of offering the possibility to maintain one's racial identity and the negative effect of perpetuating segregation and ghettoization.

Finding a way to free her black female body from dominant discourses and to fully express her identity is a central issue in Verlia's existence. Since her childhood, she conceives her own body as a vessel which both acts as a container of her "real" self and as a prison for any articulation of her personality. Despite her many attempts, the black female protagonist only manages to achieve her desire for liberation from the fleshy prison of her own body by committing an extreme act of self-destruction. Verlia's decision to jump off the cliff and therefore to choose death over life can be read as a denouncement of male violence and white oppression, as an extreme liberating practice and as a way of keeping the ultimate control over her body. Similarly, Adela's decision to 'climb the silk cotton tree up there and fly all the way back to Africa' (IAPNH, 23) is to be understood not as an act of cowardice, but rather as an act of resistance to the boundaries of space and modes of living imposed by others and as a

sign of the importance of not giving in to the “enemy”. Although Brand shows that there are multiple ways in which one’s interiority can be performed, in this novel she implies that women’s liberation from their bodies is not possible in an existence where selves and subjectivities are limited by and inscribed on the surfaces of their bodies.

Similarly, in Brand’s next novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, published in 1999, the rebel African slave Marie-Ursule and her comrades of the community named Convoi Sans Peur in Mon Chagrin cane-field plantation choose to commit mass-suicide to achieve the longed-for freedom from slavery and exploitation. Set in the years preceding the abolition of slavery in Trinidad, this mass-poisoning can be read as both an act of resistance and healing, as it has the power to finally guarantee the desired liberation, and as an act of refusal and hate of one’s own body, as Marie Ursule and her fellow slaves all ‘know that the body was a terrible thing that wanted to live no matter what. It never gave up, it lived for the sake of itself. It was selfish and full of greed. The body could pitifully recover from lashes, from weight and stroke. Only in the head you kill yourself, never in the body’ (ATF, 17).

Marie Ursule represents a good example of the dehumanized body as one of her ears has been cut, her legs and hands are streaked by the lashes of whips and cane stalks, her figure is curved and her walking has been damaged by the ten pounds iron ring she was sentenced to carry around for two years. At any rate, as scholar Simona Bertacco points out, she ‘has learned to violate her body again and again in order to resist the social normativity imposed on her as a slave and as a woman’.¹¹⁷ Indeed, Marie Ursule’s reaction to her pregnancies and her decision not to give birth and ‘never to bring a child into the world, and so to impoverish de Lambert with barrenness as well as disobedience’ (ATF, 8) reveals that her body resists the dominant inscriptions of maternal femininity. She voluntarily aborts the children that would otherwise be born in

¹¹⁷ Simona BERTACCO, 2009, p. 14.

slavery, she chooses not to participate in the annihilation of the black female subject and chooses not to foster slavery and any form of exploitation by refusing to perform as a maternal body. The only exception is represented by the birth of her daughter Bola for whom Marie Ursule has dreamt a free good life and has provided a chance for future freedom.

Spared from the mass-suicide and sent away in a safe place with her father Kamena, Bola embodies the new possibilities for a black body when 'it is experienced as bare life and apart from its historical and cultural symbolism'.¹¹⁸ Far from the white supremacy, the colonial domination and the patriarchal power, Bola expresses the creative potential for change and resistance that finds in sexuality one of its main ways of expression. Her body is no longer devalued by slavery and treated as labour in the plantations, nor is considered inferior and treated as a possession by male-sex individuals. She is completely free, she only listens to her own body, lust and libido, she gives birth to fourteen children and has no commitment with any of the fathers.

Some of her descendants as well achieve the ownership and full enjoyment of their bodies. As an example, after many years of living a respectable ordinary middle-class existence and raising three children, Bola's granddaughter Cordelia Rojas realizes that she is no longer satisfied with her life. She is suddenly 'greedy for everything she had not had' (ATF, 121) namely 'the enjoyment of her body clear and free' (ATF, 121) and gradually reclaims her subjectivity, agency, will and desire through her sexuality and her black body. As she realizes that 'she needed to break her own body open and wring its water out toward the end of the room so that she was not in a room and not riding Emmanuel Graves but riding the ocean's waves' (ATF, 107) and that she 'wasn't finished with the taste of her body' (ATF, 99), she explores new possibilities to express herself through her bi-sexual affairs.

¹¹⁸ Simona BERTACCO, 2009, p. 15.

Similarly, in the 1980's Amsterdam, Bola's granddaughter Maya envisions in her body her space for action and reclaims it for herself by devoting all her attention to it: she oils and suns it, she sculpts her thighs and biceps, she watches 'her body swell with water, she felt euphoric at the warm feel of her blood gushing uncontrollably as if a breath was let out, as if rightly she could give birth to the world and wouldn't, giddy and spinning, anything possible, and an energy so powerful she felt that she could spring above time, and wondered why she hadn't' (ATF, 221). This passage recalls the commodification of the slave's body for its ability for reproduction and Maya's choice not to procreate despite feeling as if she could give birth to the world, parallels female slaves' refusal of being prized and exploited for their ability to create new "commodities".

As Marlene Goldman observes,¹¹⁹ Brand depicts a new position of women as they are no longer only symbols of male pleasure, but rather sexual beings aware of their sexuality and claiming their own pleasure. Brand breaks the traditional stereotypical image of the caring woman who is expected to take care of her sons and husband, and presents new female characters whose pursuit of pleasure and freedom from the gendered and sexualized codes of behaviour contributes to free next generations of women from the sexual subjugation. It is a political act and a reaction to sexism aimed at resisting those practices that contribute to the racial and sexual subjugation of black women. Female sexuality is used to carve out a cultural and social space of freedom and empowerment, to break free from the confines of the domestic sphere and to subvert the traditional reproductive roles.

While Bola's female descendants show some self-empowerment and sometimes manage to overcome the burden of racism and discrimination through the transformative potential of their bodies and their female sexual desire, the majority of

¹¹⁹ Marlene GOLDMAN, 2004, Iss. 182.

her male descendants are portrayed as failed masculinity and described as being lost, broken and displaced. They inevitably experience the consequences of Diaspora as it represented 'a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being. It was also a physical rupture, a rupture of geography.' (A MAP, 5)

As an example, Eula's brother Carlyle, also known as Priest, gets involved in the lucrative dangerous trade of drug dealing and despite his efforts to change he remains trapped in a cycle of violence and criminality. Maya's brother Adrian suffers the material and psychological effects of racial discrimination and class oppression and is plagued by a life of endless and aimless wandering in Dam Square, with no sense of family and belonging, and no upward mobility and possibility to improve his condition. No matter Maya's efforts to help him and her exhortations to urge him find a job, they are both aware that 'he was not any man who could get up in the morning and hope to find a job like any man' (ATF, 181) because of his blackness and the racism linked to the colour of his skin.

Another example of the widespread forms of prejudice and racial discrimination diasporic black individuals suffer from, is to be found in the story of Private Samuel Gordon Sones, who illustrates the condition of black soldiers in the West India Regiment in a letter addressed to his mother. A mixed-race coloured man, Samuel aspires to achieve some sense of belonging via white assimilation and decides to join the military service and fight for his mother country Great Britain. Although he join the army full of expectations and hoping to prove that 'men of colour were improving their situation and would be repaid for their duty' (ATF, 79), he has to learn the difficult lesson of estrangement and discrimination on the battlefield because he finds out that black soldiers are rather treated 'neither as Christians nor as British citizens but as West Indian niggers' (ATF, 87) and are considered inferior and not worthy enough 'to combat against European soldiers because of their colour' (ATF, 87).

While *At the Full and Change of the Moon* spans time from 1824 to present time, Brand's most recent novel *What We All Long For* perfectly represents the nowadays reality of being non-white in Canada and focuses on the different ideas, positions and attitudes of first generation migrants and second generation ones.

As for the first generation migrants, Brand presents a group of individuals constantly striving to be accepted and to belong to a nation that refuses to recognize them because of their origins and their race. They are not welcome in mainstream exclusive white Canadian society and daily suffer from forms of racial discrimination in social and working environments.

In this novel, Brand shows her frustration over Canada's denial and belittlement of foreign accreditation and its tendency to relegate highly skilled immigrants to low-paying sectors. The professional documents of Tuyen's parents are not ratified by Canadian authorities so that they end up being common 'workers in the immigrant sweatshop' (WWALF, 212) despite their high-level education. Cam becomes a manicurist although knowing nothing about the profession and 'being in practice in Saigon for seven years as a family doctor' (WWALF, 66) and Tuan works in Chinatown where is 'engineering came in handy at calibrating the weight of crates and boxes on his shoulders and back'. (WWALF, 66)

First World nations marginalize and deskill Third World immigrants by decertifying them and relegating them into the working class. As a result, regaining accreditation in Canada is extremely difficult – if not impossible – and Tuyen's parents end up giving up on their own professions (doctor and engineer) and giving in to the stereotypical view of ethnicity the city foists upon them by opening a Vietnamese restaurant. 'After the loss of Quy, it made a resigned sign to them that they would lose parts of themselves. Once they accepted that, it was easy to see themselves the way the city saw them: Vietnamese food' (WWALF, 66-67). At the expense of their talents and

job aspirations, Tuan and Cam became very successful with their restaurant even if they can't actually cook the food they are defined by.

First generation migrants are recognized and defined by stereotypes and, as the narrator suggests, are 'being defined by the city' (WWALF, 66). For them, the process of self-definition is very difficult and never stable as they are paralyzed by the feelings of nostalgia for their homeland and for a lost unrecoverable past, and they do not have a firm foothold in the country they live in.

As for the second generation characters of *What We All Long For*, the uncertainties in their ancestries and in their identities are made evident since the very beginning of the novel where Brand describes them respectively as 'a young black man [...] carrying a drum in a duffel bag', a girl who is 'Asian [and] beautiful in a strange way' and a girl who is possibly 'Italian, southern' (WWALF, 2-3) traveling in the subway after a long night out in the city. Refusing absolute national identifications, these descriptions underline that new, open and transformative modes of being are available to the generation of children born in the city.

Second generation characters seldom make reference to the heterogeneous baggage they carry over their cosmopolitan experience, an inherited baggage of their parents' diasporic histories that was passed down to them and they cannot get rid of. Dionne Brand describes this heterogeneous baggage as one made up of 'all the lives they've hoarded, all the ghosts they've carried, all the inversions they have made for protection, all the scars and marks and records' (WWALF, 5). The protagonists of *What We All Long For* have different attitudes about this diasporic inheritance: Tuyen fills her run-down apartment with huge art installations in which she includes elements that hold traces of her – and other people's – past, such as videos, photographs, pieces of cloth and the letters her mother had written trying to find Quy which she sees as 'ornate and curious things of a time past' (WWALF, 25). Moreover, by collecting an

archive of people's longings for her lubaio, she transforms herself in a sort of 'compassionate listener of the diasporic traumas of the previous generations, empathic conduit and translator for the lives and experiences surrounding her'.¹²⁰ On the contrary, the bareness of Carla's apartment can be seen as a symbol of her will to leave her complex family history, her past and her extra "baggage" behind. Her fear of clutter and excess baggage reaches an obsessive degree when she experiences 'bouts of cleanliness, which could only be called violent, during which she scrubbed and scrubbed her apartment and threw out perfectly good things like plates and knives' (WWALF, 23).

Second generation diasporic individuals are torn between two different cultures, two different perceptions of the world and 'are not immigrants so they're not grateful for the marginal existence they're afforded. They were born here, or they can't remember any place else, [...] they talk one language in the classroom and another at home, [...] they are nervous and unhappy' (BOOS, 59). The process of self-definition for them is even more precarious as they find themselves in an uneasy position both in relation to the country they live in and to their parents' place of origin. They feel split between two cultures and 'two countries – their parents' and their own' (WWALF, 20) and are indeed 'outsiders to the city and outsiders in their own homes' (A MAP, 106).

Their diasporic position involves complex responsibilities as they are required to undertake the role of mediators between the multiple cultures they feel some sense of belonging to. They become city translators, acting as a sort of mediators between their parent's world and their own. In fact, Cam and Tuan see their children as 'their interpreters, their annotators and paraphrasts, across the confusion of their new life' (WWALF, 67).

The main role of Tuyen and her Canadian born older brother Binh is indeed 'translating the city's culture to their parents, even to their older sisters, [as] they were

¹²⁰ Pilar CUDER-DOMINÍGUEZ, 2010, p. 17.

both responsible for transmitting the essence of life in Toronto to the household' (WWALF, 120). In the very same way, Carla has the role of cultural translator as she has to act like a mediator between her father and her beloved troublesome brother Jamal.

As they are not fully recognized their rights, second generation diasporic individuals strive for the acknowledgement of their position of citizens. They do not only fight against the white hegemony in a city that "others" them, but also against their parents' desire for them to remain tied to the traditions and to a homeland they have no connection with. Feeling little belonging to either their ancestral homes or the Canadian city where they live, they seek a different kind of identification since they no longer find their identities in national belongings. They are 'trying to step across the borders of who they were. But they were not merely trying. They were, in fact, borderless' (WWALF, 213).

In this novel, Brand illustrates a new vision of thinking outside the national framework of ethnic identification and national borders. According to Franca Bernabei, 'youth symbolically embodies new, yet-to-become transatlantic hybridizations and the need ("longing") for alternative, transforming, and dynamic figurations of the self and the society with which it interacts'.¹²¹ For example, Oku's hybrid cooking brings together the recipes of many different countries to prepare exquisite fusion meals, Tuyen's surrealist installations bring together random disparate materials to create pieces of art that express herself, her refusal of strict ethnic national origins and her vision of heterogeneity and borderlessness.

Presenting new modes of being that constantly work to elude the dominant, in *What We All Long For* Brand shows her protagonists actively working to construct a new Toronto from below and fighting against a racist system that seeks to limit their

¹²¹ Franca BERNABEI, 2008, p.116.

possibility of action. According to Kit Dobson, the system ‘seeks to reterritorialize drifting bodies, and ensuring their ongoing motion becomes a key concern in Brand’s novel as her characters mix and merge within Toronto’.¹²²

Second generation characters transgress ethno-cultural and geopolitical borders and identifies with multiple cultures and countries. They are transnational citizens who do not feel belonging to any place and rather position themselves in the in-between liminal space. This kind of identification is evident in Tuyen’s installation “The Traveller” where she would let the audience passes her naked body wrapped in plastic bubbles and covered in stickers from various countries around the room. Tuyen indeed embodies transnationalism.

In this novel Brand seems more optimistic than in her earlier writing because although she clearly presents the limits and the difficulties faced by poor and racialized urban immigrants, she also expresses new alternatives and possibilities by depicting second generation’s lives.

Moreover, she presents Toronto as a site of possibility where one does not find him/herself but instead becomes someone else: ‘It’s like this with this city – you can stand on a simple corner and get taken away in all directions. [...] No matter who you are, no matter how certain you are of it, you can’t help but feel the thrill of being someone else’ (WWALF, 154).

At any rate, the end of the novel is quite emblematic: after years of absence, Quy has miraculously reached Toronto and sits on the front seat of Binh’s parked car while his brothers go inside their house to prepare their family for the reunion by ‘translat[ing] the years between that man and their parents. They must stand between them to decode the secret writing of loss and hurt’ (WWALF, 308). While Quy is waiting outside, he takes involuntarily part in a brutal fight with Carla’s brother Jamal and his friend Bashir

¹²² Kit DOBSON, 2006, p. 90.

- whose plan was to steal Bihn's car -, and he ends up being beaten half-dead by the road.

This dreadful final scene leaves the reader unexpectedly disappointed since all signals of hope – Tuyen's inspired vision of her lubaio, Carla's taste of freedom, Jackie's acceptance of Oku's love and even the chance of a positive future for Jamal and Quy – are betrayed. However, the ending of the novel is not negative, but rather ambivalent because it shows that diasporic individuals have both the possibility to follow Jamal's and Bashir's destructive path, and the possibility to choose the more fruitful path of art and activism that brings positive changes.

The protagonists of *What We All Long For* show that the resistance to nationalism and to all forms of racism and oppression should not be formed on a strictly oppositional basis, but rather on new webs of social relations and on open attitudes towards difference and the future. As Kit Dobson observes, they 'focus their struggle work on building and creating transnational ways of being in the city, ways of constructing communities through longing and loving'.¹²³

In *What We All Long For*, the young black men are often misrecognized as criminals by the police and found guilty regardless their actions and their behaviour. The protagonists of the novel are well aware of the burden of their black body, know that it is difficult to remain free as people of colour and recognize that imprisonment is a sort of 'rite of passage for a young black man' (WWALF, 46).

Carla repeatedly warns her younger brother Jamal that he 'can't be in the wrong place at the wrong time' (WWALF, 35) because of his blackness. Nevertheless, in his attempt to rebel and react against the white hegemony, the troubled teenager Jamal ends up being repeatedly imprisoned for petty crimes. Similarly, Oku, who is painfully aware

¹²³ Kit DOBSON, 2006, p. 97.

of the dangers of being black, does is best not 'to get involved in the ordinary and brutal shit waiting for man like him in the city' (WWALF, 166).

Although his strategy is to play it cool and not 'to react to the stimuli of the city heading toward him with all the velocity of a split atom' (WWALF, 166), at the age of eighteen he is detained by the police no matter the 'cops didn't find anything on him [...] they took him to fifty-two division. They couldn't find anything to charge him with and let him go around 6 am' (WWALF, 165).

As a matter of fact for diasporic individuals the struggle to be accepted and not be discriminated against on the basis of their skin, turns out to be totally futile as they are all anyhow in a sort of 'prison, although the bars [are] invisible' (WWALF, 166). Black individuals living in Westernized countries 'feel captive despite the patent freedom [they] experience, despite the fact that [they] are several hundred years away from the Door of No Return' (A MAP, 51).

A lesbian of colour, Brand illustrates her awareness of the ways in which her black female body is marked by race and sex. Throughout her literary works, she repeatedly inscribes a self that develops and transforms, investigates her complex subjectivity and her numerous identities, she gradually understands how these identities determine and influence her being, she ultimately comes to accept and embrace each of these identities regardless of the discrimination and oppression they bring upon her, and finally finds a community which she feels she may belong to.

In her writings, Brand shows that when the beginning of one's history is marked by an act of violence – such as the memory of the African Diaspora, the existence of that person would inevitably be troubled.

At the heart of the black diasporic individual there is an emptiness and a sense of loss and unbelonging that cannot be filled by acceptance, money or love and that derive from a missing unsettled past, an incomplete troubled present and a future than cannot be fulfilled. Black diasporic subjects travel the world; either trying to find the answers or running away from them, and this spatial investigation is at the core of Brand's project where she navigates the varied histories and places of Canada, the Caribbean and Africa in her characters' search for identity.

Ruptured from their past and their origin by the brutality of the colonial experience, Brand's diasporic characters exhibit what has been defined as "diaspora consciousness", namely the awareness of being marked by dual or rather multiple identities, of having decentred attachments, of being simultaneously "here and there" and "home and away from home". Moreover, her diasporic subjects suffer from racial prejudice and discrimination as the colour of their skin marks an element of distinction and difference in the white-dominated societies they live in.

At any rate, although Brand shows that the condition of African Diaspora is irremediable, she also shows that diasporic individuals have the potential for shaping and reshaping the situation. She illustrates how second generation migrants manage to overcome the elements of the "diaspora consciousness" – such as nostalgia, rootlessness and marginalization, by adopting a more "transnational consciousness", by overcoming the nostalgia for their past and their place of origin, by showing little attachment to their countries of origin - and generally to any place, and by opting for a more nomadic lifestyle.

She also shows how the fluidity of the diaspora can facilitate the creation of communities of belonging for all those marginalized diasporic subjects who have been either neglected or negated by the white national hegemony. Moreover, she shows how female sexuality and the appropriation of one's body can contribute to resist to sexual

and racial subjugation and can create a cultural and social space of freedom and empowerment.

Her fervent criticism of the traditional notions of home and belonging situates her body of works within a new modern discourse on Canadian identity that includes the possibility of being a Canadian of colour, an immigrant or child of immigrants, and a culturally hybrid subject.

Moreover, being aware that racial prejudice is still too much alive in Canada, in her writings Brand does not focus on the desire to acquire a Canadian identity, but rather underlines that the presence of racism has to be recognized in order to create a healthy multicultural society.

In her fiction and in her poetic works, Brand advances a new vision of progressive social transformation inclusive of sexual rights and encourages the reader to join the struggle against racism, imperialism and economic exploitation. Brand asks for the ending of institutional racism and racial segregation, and for the recognition of and respect for identity and difference demarcated by lines of race, gender, sexual orientation.

She assumes an optimistic stance and invites her audience to imagine a Canada where diversity is enhanced and accepted, dialogue between different groups is encouraged, and where the transformative potential of literature and art is acknowledged.

In a conversation with Paulo Da Costa in October 2001, with reference to the issue of identity in Canada Brand argued: "I think we are in an interesting state of becoming. I think there are great possibilities. When I walk around Toronto, the city I live in primarily, and I see people from all over the world make a living out of it, I think

that's fantastic. Fabulous possibilities exist, things haven't been worked out and we see the becoming of it. We're in the middle of becoming.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Paulo DA COSTA, "Interview with Dionne Brand", 2001, p. 2-3.

Chapter 5: Language

English
is my mother tongue.
A mother tongue is not
not a foreign lan lan lang
language
l/anguish
anguish
– a foreign anguish.
English is
my father tongue.
A father tongue is
a foreign language,
therefore English is
a foreign language
not a mother tongue.¹²⁵

I have crossed an ocean
I have lost my tongue
from the root of the old
one
a new one has sprung.¹²⁶

...how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such a slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live?¹²⁷

Language is a central feature of human identity because it is not only a powerful means of communication and appropriation of reality, but also an important tool for self-identification and a vehicle of expression for people to present their own notion of “who they are”. As Robert Le Page points out, ‘with every speech act all individuals perform, to a greater or less extent, an “act of identity”, revealing through their personal use of language their sense of social and ethnic solidarity and difference’.¹²⁸ Each person steadily employs language to communicate his/her points of view, ideas, values,

¹²⁵ Marlene N. PHILIP, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, Charlottetown: Ragweed, 1989, p.58.

¹²⁶ Grace NICHOLS, *I is a long memoried woman*, London: Karnak House, 1983, p.87.

¹²⁷ Derek WALCOTT, 1990, p.18.

¹²⁸ Robert B. LE PAGE, Andrée TABOURET-KELLER, *Acts of Identity: Creole-based approach to language and ethnicity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, back cover.

attitudes and perception of the world, believing it to be the best means to share culture, knowledge and experiences.

At any rate, language carries an ideological burden as it has played a fundamental role in reinforcing colonial and patriarchal power structures and in marginalizing and excluding minorities from the dominant discourse. Therefore, in postcolonial contexts the linguistic situation is far more complicated as one's mother-tongue can also be a "foreign language" that may even deny or silence one's identity and experience. Indeed, in the majority of the ex-colonies of the British Empire, standard English happens to be the official language no matter it is inadequate to voice the black experience and it can only articulate a white Eurocentric experience. In fact, when poet Marlene Nourbese Philip refers to English as causing "anguish" to all Caribbean people, she signifies the effect of an alien imposed 'language that was not only experientially foreign, but also etymologically hostile and expressive of the non-being of the African'.¹²⁹

A means of hegemonic social control through which people are both encouraged to accept the values and ideas of those who held power, and influenced in the way they perceive and act in the world, language is possibly the most obvious and pervasive of the colonial legacies. It works in very extensive, subtle and unmarked ways because its mechanisms of control are so embedded in everyday routine that they are constantly reinforced and often pass unnoticed.

As English is 'the medium through which a hierarchical structure is perpetuated, and the medium through which the conceptions of "truth", "order", and "reality" become established',¹³⁰ it represents a powerful tool of domination and exploitation. Moreover, as it is the language of the dominant White culture, it carries the burden and

¹²⁹ Marlene N. PHILIP, 'Making the House Our Own: Colonized Language and the Civil War of Words'. In *Fuse*, 8.6, Spring 1985, p. 43.

¹³⁰ Bill ASHCROFT, Gareth GRIFFITHS, Helen TIFFIN, 1989, p.7.

consequences of colonialism, as well as it represents an assault on the Black personality for it negates and silences the Black identity and experience.

For Afro-Caribbean poet Dionne Brand, English does not only represent an alien mother tongue, but also an oppressive father tongue that has the ability to dehumanize, subjugate and silence her as it can traditionally articulate only a white heterosexual male experience. As English denies her identity and existence, in her works Brand experiments with the poetic form and with the power and possibilities of language in order to create a more receptive mother tongue that can bear the burden of her unique experience. In fact, her experience as a migrant lesbian of colour, as triply othered by the intersection of race, gender and sexuality in a white- and male-dominated society, lacks a voice. Therefore, in her writings she tries to develop a site and a language adequate for the articulation of her identity as a whole: gender, race and sex.

As a framework to the study on Brand's search for a new language suitable for expressing her own experience, it is necessary to give some details on the cultural and linguistic background that influenced her writing and to present a short overview of the exceptional linguistic situation in the Caribbean region.

5.1: Language in post-colonial contexts and the Caribbean case

The question of language is central to the colonial and postcolonial experience because language represents a site of conflict, power and exploitation, and one of the keys to understand black people's status of oppression and their response and resistance to that condition.

As Bill Ashcroft points out, language is:

the most potent instrument of cultural control. Language provides the terms by which reality may be constituted; it provides the names by which the world may be "known". Its systems of

values – its suppositions, its geography, its concept of history, of difference, its myriad gradations of distinction – becomes the system by which social, economic, and political discourses are grounded.¹³¹

As language plays a fundamental role in shaping people's perception of the world, during the colonial period it was a common practice for the colonizing European countries to impose their languages on the dominated populations; often refusing the colonised the right to speak their native tongues in an attempt to maintain power upon them, to assimilate them in the dominant society and to impose on them the Western set of values – a process described in postcolonial studies as “colonisation of the mind”.

Nevertheless, this process of cultural assimilation did not lead to a ‘wholeness or homogeneity’,¹³² but rather to a condition of cultural and social segmentation. Indeed, in an attempt to resist the cultures and languages forcibly imposed on them by the Europeans, African diasporas creatively adapted some elements of their own cultural and linguistic traditions to the dominant European languages. As writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o points out, ‘the diasporan African reacted to the decimation of his inherited languages and the imposition of those of the conqueror by creating new languages they variously called patois, creole, or what Kamau Brathwaite now calls nation language. Their creations were acts of resistance’.¹³³

This conflicting, yet necessary relation to the colonial language is marked by two distinct processes: abrogation, which is the act of rejecting and breaking away from the language and the aesthetic values of the colonial power; and appropriation, which is the adaptation of the dominant language to convey African identity, culture and thought. As

¹³¹ Bill ASHCROFT, *Post-Colonial Transformation*, London: Routledge, 2001, p.39.

¹³² Kamau E. BRATHWAITE, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean*, Kingston: Savacou, 1974, p. 6.

¹³³ Wa Thiong'o NGUGI, ‘The role of colonial language in creating the image of a savage continent’. In <www.trinicenter.com/historicalviews/language.htm>

a result, 'the formal standard language was subverted, turned upside down, inside out, and even sometimes erased'¹³⁴ to create new alternative languages suitable 'to express widely differing cultural experiences [...] and to negotiate a gap between worlds'.¹³⁵

As professor Edward Chamberlin argues, 'pronunciation and grammar and vocabulary changed, and forms developed that differed substantially from European dialects and gave West Indians a distinct linguistic identity and unique possibilities of literary expression'.¹³⁶ These new languages arose out of the unequal and conflicting contact between European languages, the surviving elements of local indigenous vernaculars and African tongues, but since the latter were lost with the first generation of slaves, creoles were 'forced to position [themselves] solely in relation to the dominant European language, which [they] oppose while being continuously influenced by it'.¹³⁷

As for the cultural and linguistic background in the Caribbean, the situation is far more complicated. Being wholly a product of colonialism and cultural Diaspora, the Caribbean region hosts a culturally, ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous society so unique that it stands today as an emblem of hybridity and becoming. Here, the linguistic situation is extremely complex since for the Caribbean people there is no existing national language they can assume as their own and through which they can fully articulate themselves and their specific social and material reality. English is the language of education, politics and public administration, but it still represents the

¹³⁴ Marlene N. PHILIP, 1989, p.17.

¹³⁵ Bill ASHCROFT, Gareth GRIFFITHS, Helen TIFFIN, 1989, p.38.

¹³⁶ Edward J. CHAMBERLIN, *Come Back to Me My Language: Poetry and the West Indies*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993, p.10.

¹³⁷ Celia BRITTON, *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999, p. 2.

language of the colonial oppression, an authoritative father-tongue and a ‘tool of power, domination and elitist identity’.¹³⁸

In the five centuries since the Middle Passage, the main linguistic challenge in the Caribbean has been to undermine the imposition of standard English and to mould it into a language more suitable to represent the new colonial and post-colonial reality, the social environment of their region and the Afro-Caribbean identity.

Indeed, although English is ‘presented as globally applicable within the parameters of the new world, [it] expressed the historical realities of only a small number of people in the Caribbean, and expressed the current experiences of absolutely no one, the land itself being alien to pre-existing English vocabulary’.¹³⁹ English can only articulate a white Eurocentric experience which is totally alien to Caribbean people of African descent and poet and critic Kamau Brathwaite in the volume *History of the Voice* underlines its inadequacy noting that ‘we haven’t got the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience, whereas we can describe the imported alien experience of the snowfall’.¹⁴⁰ As a consequence, people in the Caribbean experience the estrangement caused by the mismatch between the European perspective they assume through language and the reality of the world they inhabit.

For instance, English does not fulfill the need for an adequate language that the Caribbean speaker can naturally identify with, but as Édouard Glissant points out, nor does Creole since it ‘was not, in some idyllic past, and is not yet our national

¹³⁸ Kachru B. BRAJ, ‘The Alchemy of English’. In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by B. ASHCROFT, G. GRIFFITHS, H. TIFFIN, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 291.

¹³⁹ Sophia LEHMAN, ‘In Search of a Mother Tongue: Locating Home in Diaspora’. In *Melus*, Vol. 23, N. 4, Winter 1998, p. 105.

¹⁴⁰ Kamau E. BRATHWAITE, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, London: New Beacon, 1984, p. 9.

language'.¹⁴¹ A collective response to the impossibility of a natural autonomous mother tongue, Creole established itself as the mother tongue of the majority of the Caribbean population and as the principal site of resistance. 'An English which is not the standard, imported, educated English'¹⁴², Creole is a language of resistance forged out of the conflicting relationship with the dominant imposed language.

As Caribbean people lack an effective language, over the last century, a contrastive attitude towards English and a revaluation of Creole emerged thanks to the work of many Caribbean writers. As Robert Le Page argues, 'It is difficult for post-colonial writers of any region or period to feel free of the colonial past until they also feel free to use their vernacular'.¹⁴³ For instance, West Indian writers have progressively moved from neglecting the linguistic plurality, to initially exploiting it for belittlement and/or comic purposes, till employing it as a vehicle of expression of true black identity and experience. While for the earlier generation of writers Standard English constitutes an element of identification as they perceive their colonial education as mind-broadening; for younger generations it represents the language of oppression they need to dismantle and reshape in order to express their authentic existence.

5.2: Brand's search for a new language

An example of the type of artist who works within the tradition to enrich and subvert it, Dionne Brand follows the lead of poets like Derek Walcott in embracing the European tradition, but unlike him, she rebels against its oppressive and restrictive qualities. In an interview with Pauline Butling, she affirms: 'I had not the same

¹⁴¹ Édouard GLISSANT, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992, p.167.

¹⁴² Kamau E. BRATHWAITE, 1984, p. 13.

¹⁴³ Robert B. LE PAGE, Andrée T. KELLER, 1985, p.73.

slavishness [...] for British culture. Instead I could critique it even as I learned it, even as it has probably scripted my aesthetics in some way'.¹⁴⁴

For instance, Brand is one of those 'women of colour [who] play two contradictory roles, that of the enforcer of tradition and that of language innovator',¹⁴⁵ since she embraces both her Afro-Caribbean and her European heritages. Like other postcolonial West Indian writers, Brand had to face the dilemma of choosing either to be truthful to her Afro-Caribbean heritage, employ English Creole and consequently be relegated to the margins; or to use English, count on a wider audience and try to assimilate to the mainstream society which tends to exclude her.

In a conversation with Pauline Butling, Brand affirms: "I was torn in those days. When I was seventeen or eighteen I felt I had to write like an African American poet. The kind of declamatory style. I started writing that way and then, at some point, I recognized that I couldn't sustain it because it wasn't my language. I needed to be much more aware of the twists and turn of the language I was working in order to use it fully."¹⁴⁶ Moreover, in the emblematic poetry collection *No Language is Neutral* she admits her interior dilemma by acknowledging the existence of a "split" in her language – a split that corresponds to her divided self as an Afro-Caribbean Canadian:

I become more secretive, language
seemed to split in two, one branch fell silent, the other
argued hotly for going home (NLIN, 28)

Even though the choice of using Standard English allows her works to reach a wider audience and market, it also involves a sacrifice as Brand is demanded to use a

¹⁴⁴ Pauline BUTLING, 2004, p.68.

¹⁴⁵ Joyce PENFIELD, *Women and Language in Transition*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987, p.XII.

¹⁴⁶ Pauline BUTLING, 2004, p. 71.

language that has the power to limit her legitimacy and authority as well as the potential to oppress, silence and deny her identity. Since English is her mother tongue, but it's not hers by ancestral rights, for Brand it represents a 'tongue of conquest, language of defeat' (LAND, 95) that is inappropriate to describe her blackness and her Afro-Caribbean experience.

Nevertheless, English represents her only possibility since the language that might better express her existence and experience as a Caribbean woman of African descent is "deaden" in the historical and ongoing attempt of the colonizers to subjugate and neutralize the colonised. As Brand points out:

No language is neutral. I used to hunt the beach at Guaya, two rivers sentinel the country sand, not backra white but nigger brown sand, one river dead and teeming from waste and alligators, the other rumbling to the ocean in a tumult, the swift undertow blocking the crossing of little girls except on the tied up dress hips of big women, then, the taste of laving was already on my tongue and cut deep into my skinny pigeon toed way, language here was strict description and teeth edging truth. (NLIN, 195)

As a matter of fact, Brand does not have an African mother tongue to count on. Moreover, standard English is unnavigable for her as it is a 'unitary language of homogeneous experience' that does not allow her to articulate her identity or her experience. As Teresa Zackodnik points out, Brand is 'blocked by standard English's "swift undertow", indicating that it is both the insidious presence of subtle yet powerful racialized, genderized, and sexualized signifiers (that denigrate and negate her as an individual), and the way in which standard English voices only white heterosexual male experience that prevent her navigation of its waters'.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ ZACKODNIK Teresa, 1996, p. 195

Nowadays English is not perceived as a tool of oppression and domination anymore, but rather as a language that can be used differently to suit the purpose of the Caribbean people or even as a global system of communication. Nevertheless, as it was forcibly imposed on African slaves during the colonial period, standard English carries the legacy of imperialism and it is still felt as an alien language by Afro-Caribbean people.

In *No Language is Neutral*, Brand includes a vivid description in which she compares the way in which English shapes the slaves' language to the way in which masters rule slaves' bodies:

Silence done curse god and beauty here, people does hear things in this heliconia peace a morphology of rolling chain and copper gong now shape this twang, falsettos of whip and air rudiment this grammar. Take what I tell you. When these barracks held slave between their stone halters, talking was left for night and hush was idiom and hot core. (NLIN, 20)

Therefore, Brand rejects the use of standard English in her texts. As Violetta Krakovsky highlights, 'black writers, such as Dionne Brand, find it impossible to talk about the experience of the enslaved and the colonized in the language of the colonizer, a language which is not their ancestral one. Therefore, they reject the standard usage of English in their texts, a practice called "abrogation" in postcolonial criticism, and speak in a form of language which reveals their cultural heritage'.¹⁴⁸ Thematically and technically, Brand deconstructs conventional English to create a language able to express and embody her history and experience and to show that its imposition as a standard is very limiting for there are not one, but many proper "Englishes".

¹⁴⁸ Violetta KRAKOVSKY, 'Dilemmas of Place and Identity in Dionne Brand's prose poem No Language is Neutral'. In *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, Vol. 4, Iss. 3, Conway: University of Central Arkansas, 2007, p. 51-67.

Moreover, she has not only to deal with the limits and restrictions of Standard English in articulating her identity and experience, but also with the inappropriateness of the literary canon. As the award-winning poet and historian Kamau Brathwaite explains, in English poetry:

Basically the pentameter remained, and it carries with it a certain kind of experience, which is not the experience of the hurricane. The hurricane does not roar in pentameter. How do you get a rhythm that approximates the natural experience. We have been trying to break out of this entire pentametric model in the Caribbean and to move into a system that more closely and intimately approaches our experience.¹⁴⁹

Indeed, Brand ‘slips many of the restrictions of “correct” or traditional English writing’,¹⁵⁰ subverting the structures of the European imposed literary canon and showing that language is very malleable and can be adapted and shaped to suit individual needs, requests and desires. She makes use of English and employs conventional poetic forms, while at the same time rebelling against them by writing from her own experience of gender and race, by incorporating a number of non-English syntactical, lexical and phonetic features, by reawakening the spoken indigenous languages of African people, and by uncovering old meanings and usages of words as well as developing new ones. As an example, in her third poetry collection *Primitive Offensive* she appropriates a traditional European form – the cantos – both to evoke her African heritage and to comment on contemporary Diaspora.

In her works, Brand employs diverse methods to attempt to subvert the dominant white male discourse and the patriarchal structures that control both language and

¹⁴⁹ Kamau E. BRATHWAITE, *Roots: Essays in Caribbean Literature*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1993, p.265.

¹⁵⁰ Kaya FRASER., ‘Language to Light On: Dionne Brand and the Rebellious Word’ in *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Vol. 30, University of New Brunswick, Spring 2005, p.293.

culture. A common trope used by many black writers, irony is one of the main weapons she uses as a way of turning conventional English against institutionalized oppression and as a way of questioning and rebelling against the traditionally accepted notion of whites' superiority. Brand parodies and challenges the hegemonic power through many linguistic devices, as for example by repeating words or by changing the meaning and usage of English terms.

With reference to Brand and other West Indian women writers such as Philip and Harris, Carol Morrell writes: 'they startle the reader by interrogating standard English and substituting new usages, often in the Caribbean and their Canadian demotic, for old ones'.¹⁵¹ Indeed, even though her poetry is mostly written in conventional English, Brand draws on the linguistic remnants of African languages and on the richness of the West Indian continuum of language in her effort to alter her oppressive "father tongue" and mould it into a more receptive mother tongue that can bear the burden of her unique experience.

The intrusion of both untranslated African words and Creole terms and structures, which highlights that the British have never entirely assimilated the African people, is necessary because conventional English does not contain the adequate words and sounds to describe the Black experience. In the volume *History of the Voice*, Edward Kamau Brathwaite explains that West Indian Writers 'haven't got the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is [their] experience, whereas [they] can describe the imported alien experience of the snowfall'.¹⁵² Brand herself notes that:

I have discovered

¹⁵¹ Carol MORRELL, *Grammar of Dissent: Poetry and Prose by Claire Harris, M. Nourbense Philip, Dionne Brand*, Fredericton: Goose Lane, 1994, p.10.

¹⁵² Kamau E. BRATHWAITE, 1984, p. 9.

how much we are

how many words I need. (CHRON, 22)

As English words are either inappropriate or unavailable to articulate black experience and to express her perspective and positions, Brand must work on English language and alter it to make it more personal and adequate to express herself and her characters, or otherwise her voice will fall silent. Similarly, as Marlene Nourbese Philip points out, in order for English to become her mother tongue, language ‘has to be dislocated and acted upon – even destroyed – so that it begins to serve [her] purposes.’

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In an ongoing effort to resist its ability to dehumanize, subjugate and silence black subjects, especially women, Brand deconstructs conventional English, questions its assumptions of universality and creates a new language that embodies ‘her political, affective, and aesthetic engagement with the human condition of the black woman – and, more exactly, of all those oppressed by the hegemonic program of modernity’.¹⁵⁴ As a black lesbian, Dionne Brand is triply aware of the powerful role of language which creates and determines racial, gender and sexual identities. Therefore, in her works, she challenges and overcomes the dominant racial and gender biases of language through processes such as abrogation, which is the refusal to conform to the standards of conventional language; appropriation, which is the adaption and moulding of language to suit one’s own reality and needs; and feminization, which is the refusal to accept a male-oriented linguistic tradition.

As her experience as a diasporic lesbian of colour – triply othered by the intersection of race, gender and sexuality in a white- and male-dominated society – lacks a voice, Brand experiments with the poetic form and with the power and

¹⁵³ Marlene N. PHILIP, 1989, p.19.

¹⁵⁴ Franca BERNABEI, 2007, p.6.

possibilities of language to develop a new hybrid language suitable for articulating all inseparable aspects of her polyvalent subjectivity at the same time, because she is never solely a woman, a person of colour, or a lesbian. In *No Language is Neutral*, Brand stresses her silencing by repeating the refrain ‘you can hardly hear my voice’ (NLIN, 37-39) at the beginning of each stanza of the IV section, and later calls for a new language claiming that ‘this sudden silence needs words instead of whispering’ (NLIN, 38). In the same section of the poem, she writes:

...these warm
watery syllables, a woman’s tongue so like a culture,
plunging toward stones not yet formed into flesh,
language not yet made... (NLIN, 35)

By articulating and recovering from silence an experience which was previously neglected and rendered invisible in white heterosexist society and language, Brand makes a declaration of her existence, of her presence in the world. According to Teresa Zackodnik, it is the ‘hostility that she has experienced towards her identity and existence as a lesbian of colour – hostility invested in the etymology and use of both standard English and nation language’,¹⁵⁵ that motivates her search for a new language. For instance, both standard English and Creole are inadequate to describe her experience: on the one hand, English expresses her identity as a Canadian woman, but denies her African heritage; on the other hand, nation language articulates her blackness, but ‘exiles her as a woman and a lesbian’.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Teresa ZACKODNIK, 1995, p.201.

¹⁵⁶ Teresa ZACKODNIK, 1995, p.201.

Since ‘to choose between standard English and nation language is to cut off a branch of one’s experience’¹⁵⁷ as neither of them is sufficient to articulate her existence, in order to voice her polyvalent subjectivity, Brand develops a third hybrid language born from the contact and the intersection of Standard English and nation language. As Zackodnik argues, Brand ‘locates her critique of language not in an attempt to resurrect or construct a neutral language, nor from a liminal position between standard English and nation language, but in the heteroglossia¹⁵⁸ of both languages’.¹⁵⁹ Writing from an in-between space and using this new hybrid language combining English and nation language, Brand is finally able to represent her dual experience, to express her perspective and positions, to articulate an authentic black experience, and to voice wholly her identity as a lesbian woman of colour.

A leitmotif in Brand’s literary production, the struggle to find a personal language to articulate her experience reaches its climax in the remarkable *No Language is Neutral* (1991), a book that celebrates the empowerment and agency rooted in language. In this poetry collection she demonstrates that – despite the difficulty of the task – it is possible to overcome the heaviness of language and ‘to voice the previously unvoiced [and] to speak multivocally from a divided subject position (that of a black lesbian Caribbean Canadian)’¹⁶⁰.

Nevertheless, Brand’s confidence in the fullness and potential of language is nowhere to be found in her following poetry book, *Land to Light On* (1997), where she writes about her own and other outsiders’ experiences in an hostile and unfamiliar landscape where immigrants are isolated and discriminated against. In this collection, Brand feels disempowered and harmed by language, recognizing its inadequateness and

¹⁵⁷ Teresa ZACKODNIK, 1995, p.202.

¹⁵⁸ Introduced by the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin in his essay “Discourse in the Novel”(1934), the term heteroglossia refers to the coexistence of distinct varieties within a single linguistic code.

¹⁵⁹ Teresa ZACKODNIK, 1995, p.194.

¹⁶⁰ Kaya FRASER, 2005, p.292.

ineffectiveness to bring lasting political change. As Kaya Fraser points out, this distrust in the power of language is linked to the feeling of discomfort and grief caused by the hostile social environment in which Brand lives. According to Himani Bannerji: ‘life, I am convinced, does not allow for the separation between form and content. It happens to us in and through the language in which it actually happens. The words, their meaning – shared and personal – their nuances are a substantial and material part of our reality’.¹⁶¹ Therefore, as lived experience and the words to convey it are integrated, the physical and verbal alienation Brand experiments in Canada results in a negative acknowledgement of the impossibility of expressing herself through language and, consequently, on her resignation as ‘no amount of will can change it’ (LAND, 17). In the first section of *Land to Light On*, after having been verbally attacked by a racist white man in a red truck, Dionne Brand states in fact:

‘...I try to say a word but it fall. Fall
like the stony air. I stand up there but nothing
happen [...] I did not
know which way to turn except to try again, to find
some word that could be heard by the something
waiting. My mouth could not find a language
I find myself sorry instead, useless at that. I sorry.
I stop by the mailbox and I give up (LAND, 5)

Brand cannot recover from the racial and sexual violence and hatred permeating the world that surrounds her. Moreover, the unreadability of her environment accentuates her feeling of powerlessness:

¹⁶¹ Himani BANNERJI, ‘The sound barrier: Translating Ourselves in Language and Experience’. In *Language in Her Eye: Views on Writing and Gender by Canadian Women Writing in English*, ed. by L. SCHEIER, S. SHEARD, E. WACHTEL, Toronto: Coach House, 1990, p.32.

If you come out and you see nothing recognisable,
if the stars stark and brazen like glass,
already done decide you cannot read them (LAND, 4)

As Fraser argues, Brand ‘finds herself useless, bereft in a northern landscape without a sufficient language of her own’¹⁶² because she can count only on the language of the master, the very same language used by the white man in the red truck to attack her. In the second section of *Land to Light On*, Brands admits in fact:

All I have are these hoarse words that still owe
this life and all I’ll be is tied to this century and waiting
without a knife or courage and still these same words
strapped to my back (LAND, 9)

Nevertheless, Brand is not left solely with English for she ‘performs a linguistic tour de force which blends Creole and non-Creole English in an ambiguous code’.¹⁶³ Moreover the emphatic code-switch made in Brand’s statement: ‘My mouth could not find a language, I find myself sorry instead, useless at that. I sorry’ (LAND, 5) seems to suggest that she is language-less – as she has not an authentic mother tongue to count on –, but not speechless.

Indeed, in her novels and poetry collections, although English is still employed on a full scale or just partially, she keeps on experimenting with the transformative potential of her demotic and the remnants of African languages not only in an attempt to find a

¹⁶² Kaya FRASER, 2005, p.299.

¹⁶³ Maria CARIDAD CASAS, ‘Orality and the Body in the Poetry of Lillian Allen and Dionne Brand: Towards an Embodied Social Semiotics’ in *A Review of International English Literature*, Vol. 33, N. 2, April 2002, p.22.

voice for herself and her people, but also to strengthen the connection with her heritage and tradition.

For example, at the beginning of the novel *In Another Place, Not Here* the reader is plunged into an unrelieved intimate first-person Creole by which the cane-cutter Elizete recalls the moment in which she first saw Verlia. In an interview with Christian Olbey, Brand explains her choice to use a poetic Black language for Elizete by saying: ‘It’s her own tongue, and it’s a lyrical tongue. I wanted to redeem the language that I know exists in her body [...], it is more apt than any language that I or the other characters in the book, let’s say Verlia, would have. [...] Elizete has developed a language through which to speak her life’.¹⁶⁴ At any rate, Brand does not limit the use of Caribbean demotic only to dialogues and assert that “for the most part, many novels used British formal standard English writing. And used the demotic only in the dialogue. And so for me it felt like the dialogue just stuck out there. The dialogue demarcated the difference. And the difference that was being demarcated was a difference of class and race and all those things. And therefore it subjugated the characters in the book”.¹⁶⁵

In this novel, Brand adopts a polyphonic narration that rejects an authoritative, homogeneous single voice and allows several individuals - the omniscient narrator, Verlia, Elizete, the woman Elizete was given to, Adela - to speak about their own experiences in different registers. Thanks to this multiplicity of voices, the reader is offered more than a single version of the story and can enjoy different perspectives of it.

In her writings, sentences flow for paragraphs without punctuation, interior monologues and dialogues appear as transcription of oral speech, sections shift between past and present tenses, the narrative voice suddenly changes from first, to second and third person and the language is a combination of Caribbean and Canadian

¹⁶⁴ OLBEY Christian, 2002, p. 91.

¹⁶⁵ Pauline BUTLING, 2004, p. 74.

dialects. In her latest works, Brand is even much more innovative and experimental as for what concerns the style and language. In particular, the elimination of punctuation, the use of polysemous words and the vagueness of sentence construction, create a site of possibility open to change and reinterpretation where author and reader jointly contribute to interpret and negotiate meanings. Granting the choice to be interpreted in numerous unfixed ways, Brand's writings are in a continual state of flux which highly resembles the perpetual process of becoming of diasporic identities.

The creation of a new hybrid language and the adoption of a different approach that challenge the hegemonic system is to be understood as an act of resistance. Clarke celebrates this subversive radical act when he argues that 'since Standard English was thrust upon African diasporic people against their wills, it is marvellous justice that, in every exilic African culture, from New Brunswick to New Orleans, from Jamaica to California, that tongue now meets a different standard'.¹⁶⁶

By using a new language that is 'transformative, polyvocal and constantly shifting',¹⁶⁷ Brand challenges the standards set by patriarchal white English through both the form and the content of her statements. Her effort to create a new language is seen by Rinaldo Walcott as an example of the performativity of "black language" because she 'remake or rather alter language to make it perform the acts of [her] politics'.¹⁶⁸

Her writings might fail to enact and effect the social and political changes she hopes to achieve, but she is well aware that art perhaps has never been able to bring to that radical subversive agency desired by artist and theorists. In fact in *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* she admits:

¹⁶⁶ George Elliott CLARKE, 'No Language is Neutral: Seizing English for Ourselves'. In *Odysseys Home: Mapping Afro-Canadian Literature*, ed. by G.E CLARKE., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002, p. 276.

¹⁶⁷ Teresa ZACKODNIK, 1995, p. 205.

¹⁶⁸ Rinaldo WALCOTT, 1997, p.87.

Someone at a party
drew me aside to tell me a lie
about my poems
they said “you write well,
your use of language is remarkable”
Well if that was true, hell
would break loose by now,
colonies and fascist state would fall,
housework would be banned
pregnant women would walk naked in the streets,
men would stay home at night, cowering (CHRON, 33)

Brand’s writings display what Carol Boyce Davies defines as ‘the tension between articulation and aphasia, between the limitations of spoken language and the possibility of expression, between space for certain forms of talk, and lack of space for Black women’s speech, the location between the public and the private.’¹⁶⁹ Even though the negotiation of these several tensions may not always lead to their resolution, through challenging standard English and searching for a voice and a site suitable for the authentic expression of black identity and experience, Brand questions and subverts the historically constructed ‘readings’ of the black experience imposed by the hegemonic western discourse and reclaims the right to express her identity and existence.

¹⁶⁹ Carole BOYCE DAVIES, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 153.

Conclusions:

A black-skinned woman politically engaged in the Black Diaspora, Brand writes to give voice to her experience and to fill the absence left by the legacies of colonialism and racism. Her engagement as a writer is made clear in an extract from an interview with professor Dagmar Novak where the Afro-Caribbean Canadian writer admits:

I write out of a literature, a genre, a tradition, and that tradition is the tradition of black writing. And whether that black writing comes from the United States as African American writing or African Caribbean writing or African writing from the continent, it's in that tradition that I work. I grew up under a colonial system of education, where I read English literature and liked it because I love words. But within that writing, there was never my presence. I was absent from that writing. That writing was predicated on imperial history and imperial aspirations – British or American. That imperial history included black slavery. It included the decimation of native peoples. And if the literature nurtured on this is presented to you as great art and you are absent, or the forms and shapes in which you are included are derided, then you know that this literature means to erase you or to kill you. Then you write yourself.¹⁷⁰

Moreover, in the essay collection *Bread Out of Stone*, with reference to the situation in Canada, Brand states that diasporic subjects are in a subaltern position and are only given silence as their discourse since there is a dominant voice that 'claim[s] to speak for them all. A dominant voice that needs not of course all of [their] consent – [their] silence or [their] repressed voice is sufficient' (BOOS, 141).

In order to resist the erasure of Black diasporic people's identities and experiences and to secure their voices, throughout her literary career Brand collects, records and

¹⁷⁰ Dionne BRAND, 'Interview with Dagmar Novak'. In *Other Solitudes*, ed. by M. RICHMOND, L. HUTCHEON, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 273.

transforms historical fragments, ignored narratives and oral histories into a coherent written narrative for the Black Diaspora.

A writer and political activist concerned not only with issues directly related to the history of Black Diaspora, but also to other realities of discrimination and violence against other minorities, Brand insists that revising, rewriting and revoicing history is a crucial act. Her artistic project is one that articulates strategies of resistance against the widespread imperialist and patriarchal ideological and social structures, which oppress, deny and silence Afro-Caribbean individuals and individuals of colour globally.

Her literary production shows an ongoing effort to explore the presence of blackness in the Caribbeans, in Canada and in the world at large, a strong will to vocalize diasporic black identities, and a desire to find a place and a community for Black people. These aims that stand at the core of her artistic project reflect Brand's own needs and desires to find a way to fully express her identity as a whole, to offer alternatives to the dominant readings and discourses of her black female body, and to find for herself a community and a place of belonging in the Canadian white male-centred society.

Throughout her literary career and her activist life, Brand investigates and struggle against the limits and the difficulties diasporic individuals like her has to face daily in their challenge to negotiate their identities and to reinvent themselves in the diaspora.

As illustrated in Chapter 2, the lives of diasporic people are marked by a paradoxical condition as they are cut off from their past and haunted by their past at the very same time. Indeed, the trauma of the Middle Passage and slavery and the terrible experience of Diaspora's dispersal across multiple lands do not only result in the loss of connection to one's ancestral roots, origin and past, but also in an inescapable haunting condition that affects and shapes the lives of diasporic individuals. Moreover, being divided between the nostalgic desire for their homeland and past and the will to reclaim

a new home and community in the present, diasporic individuals run the risk of finding themselves blocked in a status of personal and political paralysis and apathy.

In her writings, Brand investigates the rupture in history faced by diasporic subjects who experience feelings of loss, nostalgia and longing; who are haunted by their ancestors' colonial past and the horrors of slavery; who are trapped in a reality of suffering and divided between an unforgettable traumatic past and an unfathomable future. Taking the reader through the consequences of Diaspora, Brand's writings show that although it is not possible to fully transcend the hauntings of the past because it is not possible to "unhappen" history, the historical ruptures and rootlessness can represent a positive starting point for diasporic individuals since they allow for the possibility of relocating selves in the contemporary world. Her characters indeed, though marked by a past history of exploitation and oppression, are subjects with new opportunities for self-development and independence.

Pointing at the 'redemptive and restorative' (BOOS, 37) power of history, in her writings Brand shows that the knowledge of the past is crucial to make positive changes in the present and to shape the future. Moreover, she enables her audience to confront and revise their relation to something that has been lost, to move beyond the feelings of melancholic nostalgia, to reach a new degree of awareness of one's self and position in the world, and to acknowledge that the present can still be worked upon to make things better for the future.

As described in Chapter 3, consequently to Diaspora's dislocation and familiar separations, the sense of self, the relationship to origins and homeland, and the connection between identity and place have been eroded. Indeed, the existence of diasporic individuals is contradictory and fragmentary as they live in a condition of rootlessness and in-betweenness, they do not belong to any place and belong to many places at the same time, and are physically and psychically homeless, both away from

home and at home. Wavering between their motherlands and the foreign countries they live in, diasporic subjects face the dilemma of cultural displacement, fragmentation and discontinuity; work to either develop or recover an effective identifying relationship between self and place; and seek to find an “elsewhere” - namely a space where they can imagine new alternatives and strive to actualize them in order to improve their condition of living.

In her writings, Brand represents spaces as complex sites of subject formation in which there cannot be any easy identification between self and place, body and state. What can be observed in her works is a general sense of displacement or lack of belonging resulting in diasporic individuals’ common desire to take part in the construction of a communal space that challenges and overcomes the traditional ideas of home, belonging, citizenship and nationhood.

Her refusal of the concept of national identity comes in response to her exclusion from the national imagination, her rejection of the physical geographical boundaries of nations is motivated by the fact that national borders do not reflect diasporic people’s imagined countries. Moreover, although at the beginning of her literary career Brand initially expresses a longing for home and belonging, she later acknowledges the impossibility for diasporic subjects to claim one geographical site as a place of origin and belonging, she foregrounds the centrality of these ideas and rather offers an alternative to them by outlining the concept of drifting.

As scholar Kevin Quashie points out, neither Brand can simply give up on the idea of home and of a place of belonging, nor she can accept what other people have deemed home to be. For her, ‘the idea of home, of a land to belong to, remains a struggle [...], particularly because home and land and nation [...] are irreconcilable to her sense of herself not only because they evoke and enunciate patriarchy and white supremacy but

especially because they do not speak to the home she is longing for'.¹⁷¹ By refusing both the “here” of Canada, the “there” of her native Caribbean islands and the “all the way back” of the Africa of her ancestors as suitable home for herself, Brand demonstrates to be aware that longing for a place of belonging neither can be satisfied in an escapist flight to one’s dreamed about motherland, nor in the sweet memories of one’s country of origin, nor in the assimilation to the dominant white culture in the country of settlement.

Brand problematizes all those notions, challenges the constructions of received geography and discloses the complexities and contradictions of global cities that, although being multicultural, are still permeated by the injustices derived from a white cultural hegemony. The city is perhaps not the place one can call home, but the place where diasporic people can project their “homing” desires and claim a space of their own. In her search for a different space where freedom, belonging and transformation are possible, Brand challenges her readers to imagine a Canada where diversity is accepted, where dialogue between different groups is encouraged and where the transformative potential of cooperation is acknowledged.

As discussed in Chapter 4, when the beginning of one’s history is marked by an act of violence – such as the memory of the Middle Passage and the colonial experience; the existence of that person would be inevitably troubled. Ruptured from their past and their origin by the brutality of Diaspora, diasporic individuals reveal a doubleness, an emptiness and a sense of loss and unbelonging that derive from a missing unsettled past, an incomplete troubled present and a future than cannot be fulfilled. Diasporic subjects struggle to find a balance between the traditional African self and the westernized diasporic one, and a positioning and sense of belonging in the host land, but this effort

¹⁷¹ Kevin E. QUASHIE, *Black women, identity, and cultural theory: (un)becoming the subject*, Piscataway, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004, p. 164.

is hindered by forms of institutionalised racism and widespread stereotypes on blackness. In westernized white-dominated societies, black skin marks an element of distinction and difference, and renders black diasporic individuals simultaneously invisible through forms of marginalization and alienation, and hyper-visible through acts of humiliation, discrimination, haunting down and oppression.

In her body of work, Brand illustrates the process of identity-making for diasporic people who have fractured or confused connections to multiple places and who find difficulties to make sense of the complexities of their heritage. Even though she shows that the aftermaths of African Diaspora are inescapable, she also shows that diasporic subjects have the potential for shaping and reshaping their condition by overcoming the feelings of rootlessness and unbelonging, by adopting a “transnational consciousness”, by going beyond the nostalgia for their past and their origins, by showing little attachment to their homeland and to any place in general, and by adopting a more nomadic lifestyle. Moreover, although she demonstrates that the diasporic black body is totally imprinted by a history of slavery and colonial exploitation, she exposes how the claiming and appropriation of one’s body can contribute to resist racial subjugation, can help to create a cultural and social space of freedom and empowerment, can allow the possibility of social transformation and can display one’s agency and self-control.

A woman, a lesbian and a member of an ethnic minority in the Canadian white male-centred society, Brand faces great difficulties in finding a community due to her cultural displacement and the physical and emotional distance from her longed for homeland Trinidad. Moreover, her gender and sexual orientation prohibit her from finding a strong sense of belonging within most communities and social movements. Target of a triple discrimination, Brand uses literature to exemplify the othering occurring when black lesbians connects or relates to other people in the Canadian

society. She claims space for gay representations in the contemporary culture by ‘linking lesbian and feminist consciousness with anti-racist, anti-colonial politics’.¹⁷²

Furthermore, in her body of work, she seeks to dislodge the black female body from dominant readings and discourses, to counter new alternative representations of it, to empower female subjects and to explore women’s heterosexual and homosexual experiences. Her woman-centred writings contribute to re-locate diaspora from a traditionally male-centred point of view that ‘makes us see what happens to men as more offensive than what happens to women’ (BOOS, 66), to a new alternative point of view that focuses on black women’s readings of and experiences within the Diaspora. Her criticism of the traditional notions of identity and belonging positions her writings within a discourse on Canadian identity that includes the possibility of being a Canadian of colour, being an immigrant, being a child of immigrant and even being a culturally hybrid subject.

As explained in Chapter 5, language carries an ideological burden because it has played an important role in reinforcing colonial and patriarchal power structures and in marginalizing and weakening minorities. In post-colonial contexts, diasporic people – especially women – are silenced and located outside the dominant discourse just by being the opposite to what is considered meaningful and powerful, and to give voice to their experiences and histories they have no other choice than using a language of oppression that carries in itself the politics that has ignored and excluded them on the basis of race and gender. Language can indeed represent an obstacle as it is a product and property of the dominant culture and it carries that culture’s ideologies.

Having recognized that English denies and distorts the experiences and identities of racialized individuals – especially women, in her writings, Brand rejects the standard use of it and rather searches for an alternative voice capable of representing her

¹⁷² Heather SMYTH, 1999, p. 144.

subjectivity as a whole. Combining standard formal English with Caribbean nation language, she finds a voice that will not impede her self-representation and creation as a black Canadian lesbian writer. Brand challenges the ability of a language infused with white heterosexist ideology to articulate a black lesbian presence and experience, and creates a language that allows her not to choose between articulating herself as a Caribbean woman or as a Canadian one, between speaking in Standard English or in the Caribbean demotic, between expressing her racial identity or her sexual identity or her lesbian identity.

Throughout her literary career, Brand both demonstrates to be very optimistic about the power of language and the possibility to express herself, and to acknowledge that language is very problematic as it has the power either to free her or to imprison her. At any rate, in her writings, she achieves finding a voice that confidently moves between standard English and nation language and ‘the kind of language she uses – whether it is deemed hybrid, dialectical, postcolonial, or anything else – allows her to voice the previously unvoiced, to speak multivocally from a divided subject position (that of a Black lesbian Caribbean Canadian).’¹⁷³

Brand’s writings trouble and challenge the homogeneity of the singular dominant discourse of power as they work on the margins and on the in-between liminal spaces to interrogate the absences, the silences, and the hierarchical politics of difference and exclusion. As scholar Rinaldo Walcott points out, Brand ‘constructs new sites for locating the self and making meaning in the world. Writing from in-between spaces, [...] she offers a new gaze that is a second look because [she] drags along the traces of historical past.[Her] is no mere rewriting; it’s a challenge to the continually foster the grounds for a possibility of the new’.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Kaya FRASER, 2005, p. 292.

¹⁷⁴ Walcott RINALDO, 1997, p. 75.

Aware of the transformative potential of art, Brand explores how the blacks and other minorities are forgotten within a matrix of white-centred education and history, and claims that ‘not a whisper in all those fine words, literary theories, close readings and analyses that were thought, learned and committed to memory, nowhere a sign of a whole life of a Black person, their troubles, their moral dilemmas, moral feasts, beautiful souls, inane preoccupations...Nothing’ (BOOS, 168). By focusing on the lives and experiences of black diasporic subjects, Brand attempts to fill the absence left by the legacy of colonialism and racism and to draw the attention on a presence that till then was dismissed, ignored and silenced. The fiction created by Brand tells the stories of racial minority women in Canada, in the Caribbean and in the world at large, thereby creating for them an identity that was previously absent from the national cultural and literary landscape.

Inheritors of centuries of discriminations and racially motivated violence, Brand’s diasporic characters do not only illustrate the ways in which the African diaspora’s heritage of dislocation and dispossession daily complicates and affects diasporic people lives, but also they stands as examples of the positive attitudes and approaches that would allow for social change and improvement of their status and living condition in the modern society. Moreover, Brand’s fictional characters and poetic voice can in some way be seen as self-portraits of the author herself, because they stands as representations of her identity, past experiences, political thoughts, attitude and intentions. Through her literary activity, Brand finds her personal way to to give voice to her own experience and to try to undermine and challenge the powers that silence and neglect her on the basis of race, gender and sexual orientation.

The fiction and poetry created by Brand allows her not only to fully express each of her identities - woman, black and lesbian – at once, but also to re-invent and re-think herself and figure new possibilities for the future. Indeed, Brand envisions the

transformative potential of art and perceives her works as sites of possibility, resistance and becoming. In her writings, she has never attempted to abstract herself from her specific body, from the past and the histories of the people and places from which she comes, or from the circumstances of her life, but rather she has used the specificity of these circumstances and of her heritage to strive for social change. She writes not only in an effort to change the conditions in which she and other fellow black diasporic men and women live, but also to encourage them to let go the anger that inhibits them from moving forward and to envision and work towards a better future.

Brand's writings involve a complex process of cultural exchange, invention and re-invention, and explore the difficulties as well as the political possibilities of the diasporic space of in-betweenness. Rinaldo Walcott observes that Brand's works 'occupy the space of the in-between, vacillating between national borders and diasporic desires, ambitions and disappointments. [Her] works suggest the possibilities of the new'.¹⁷⁵ As Joanne Soul argues, 'the way Brand negotiates disparate geographies and histories speaks volumes about her sense of human agency, potential, and creativity, against a backdrop of history that is haunting and deeply scarring'.¹⁷⁶ Her texts set out a new terrain of alternative possibilities that enables diasporic individuals to envision new possibilities for the future, to negotiate alternative ways of being, to create new visions that replace the dominant ones, and to to imagine new forms of belonging to communities and places that have traditionally ignored and excluded them. According to Brand, 'more vibrant possibilities exist in the multitude of voices now emerging in this country' (BOOS, 131).

¹⁷⁵ Walcott RINALDO, 1997, p. 26.

¹⁷⁶ Joanne SAUL, 2004, p. 60.

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